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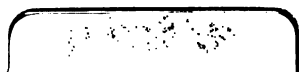
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FORMOSA:

A Tale of the French Blockade of 1884-1885

A CHINA COAST TALE

BY

LISE BOEHM.

Giles, E.W. (Edersheim)

No. 10

Series VI

CHINA COAST TALES

BY

LISE BOEHM.

. . . un volume que les sottises humaines m'ont aisément fourni.

LE DIABLE BOITEUX.

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SHANGHAI—HONGKONG—YOKOHAMA—SINGAPORE:

KELLY AND WALSH, LIMITED.

1906

Nota Bene !

The confiding reader is expected to believe :—

That the aim of these *Tales* is to illustrate life at the various Treaty Ports which have been opened, oyster-like, by the bayonet during the past fifty years.

That no attempt has been made to caricature individuals, but rather to portray types of ordinary occurrence.

That while the vehicle of these *Tales* is fiction, their essence is fact.



Formosa :

A Tale of the French Blockade of 1884-1885.

CHAPTER I.

AN April fog, laden with disaster to shipping up and down the China coast, had been wrapping round the beautiful island of Formosa for some five or six days.

Overhead first of all, and then all around, it had come damp as a Scotch mist, and thick enough to satisfy even a Cockney. Behind the fog, or in it, there might be trees, and houses, and hills. But as far as human sight went, these were simply non-existent. It was weather to make the foreign inhabitants of the place, male, use strong language, and to warrant the foreigners, female, in losing their tempers.

For Formosa, in foggy weather, was still more the Back of Beyond than usual. The English communities in the mainland ports of China no doubt feel there is cause for sympathy as regards themselves, since they are all pretty equally ten thousand miles away from home. But the Kantow community, the largest one in Formosa, had reason to feel that they deserved not only sympathy but a martyr's crown and palm. They had no cable,* and so the entire continent of Europe might have been annihilated without their knowing the calamity within twenty-four hours. They had a bad supply of food and had to pay for the articles they could get what in China were considered high prices. And, last of all,

* 1884-1885.

when it was foggy weather they could not see their only links with the outside world, the steamers, coming towards the Port till they were close to the bar at the river's mouth, and within half-a-mile from the anchorage. And it had always been one of the greatest pleasures of the Kantow people to distinguish the smoke and build of a steamer from the sails of a junk on the distant horizon, quite fifteen miles away.

Mrs. Drury, then, the wife of the Commissioner of the Imperial Chinese Maritime Customs at Kantow, the port of North Formosa, was rightfully in a bad temper at tiffin on this foggy day in April. She had been spending most of the morning drying her furs before a blazing fire, and sighing over the damage done by moth and wear. The China boy must have come in for a share of her ill-humour, for he was handing the dishes with the resigned and injured air of a man who will shortly find his solace in an opium den. The cat, generally a pampered minion, had left off clamouring vainly for food. And Mrs. Drury herself had begun, and was half-way through her meal, without waiting for her husband to come back from the Custom House.

Mrs. Drury was a stout, short woman of some six or seven and thirty years of age. True, you might have doubted the correctness of these figures at the first glance at her face, but a little longer acquaintance with her would settle the matter beyond doubt. Mrs. Drury was certainly neither old nor yet middle-aged, as the fair sex has decided in China. Now to be middle-aged a lady must be 40, and to be old 55. And yet no one ever saw an old English lady in China, and scarcely one who will own to being middle-aged. The older generation fades away before the new, and when the new generation reads in the paper the death of such a one, late of Shanghai, or Amoy, or Canton, there is scarcely one contemporary left to answer the question, Who was he?

Mrs. Drury, however, would have scouted the notion that she was approaching middle-age. She had been in China about twelve years, but then she always said she had married at nineteen. There were no inconvenient daughters coming on to push their mother out of her place in society. Mrs. Drury had always powdered, and, in the cool weather at any rate, tinted her face, because the cold made her look purple. She had always been stout, and as for her hair, which libellous persons whispered had been dark brown in the old days, it was, now at least, bright golden. The face was powerful, if not particularly beautiful. The nose was large and hooked, the jaw and chin almost masculine in their hardness. The eyes were quick and observant, not very large, nor of any particular colour, but well set—the eyes of a person who has all her wits about her. She was, in short, Mrs. Drury of the Customs, and not Mr. Drury's wife.

Not that Mr. Drury himself was a nonentity, or an admiring shadow and follower of his wife. People who knew them intimately frequently declared that only an Oliver Drury could have existed twelve years in close companionship with Mrs. Patricia Drury without committing suicide, or developing epileptic fits, or finding that the air of Europe was absolutely necessary for his wife's health. Mr. Drury was a man whose good-nature and thick-skinnedness were written on every feature of his face. He was so utterly amiable to the world in general that people felt ashamed to speak evil of him. During his whole married life—for he had wakened one morning from a long boyish engagement to find himself married to a girl two or three years his senior—he had always treated Mrs. Drury's ill-natured fits as gigantic though awkward jokes. Truth to tell, he liked his wife very much, though she sometimes put him in false positions socially. When she was in one of her weather-moods he would come home late to tiffin and go back to the Custom House immediately afterwards. For his office was his harbour of refuge, and he

was too good a man of business not to have early been made a Commissioner, and too kind-hearted not to be adored by his subordinates.

So, though he had come home late by half-an-hour, and Mrs. Drury had prepared a most stony countenance to receive him, Oliver Drury was as usual in the best of humours, and quite ready to do the agreeable by himself. He came into the room, bringing a rush of damp air and penetrating chill from the house door, which he always persisted in leaving open, and said cheerfully :

"The *Taiwan* is just outside the bar, Patricia."

"Three days out from Amoy, I suppose, and the beef all spoilt, of course! How provoking!" And Mrs. Drury viciously severed the leg of the chicken from its body.

Now Mr. Drury knew, from the pilot boat which had just come in from the steamer, that the *Taiwan* had only taken eighteen hours to come across, but he was too wise a politician to tell his wife so immediately, as she would at once have demanded why the pilot boat had not brought in her beef, and insisted that it was all his (Oliver's) fault that this had not been done. For Kantow had no meat-market to speak of, and all the wise housekeepers contracted to have joints of beef and mutton sent over from Amoy by every steamer. Amoy, as is well known, used to be the starting-place of the Formosa steamers, and supplied the island with many of the necessaries and most of the luxuries of life. The run from Amoy to Kantow is not generally a long one, and in winter at any rate Mrs. Drury's fresh meat supplies were pretty sure to arrive in good condition. But the delay of a few hours outside the bar till the tide was sufficiently high to enable the steamer to get in to the anchorage, and land her perishable goods, Mrs. Drury invariably considered to be fatal to her joints. And so there was a standing grievance with her husband on this point:

that Mrs. Drury always wanted him to ask the pilot to bring in her meat in his boat, and that Mr. Drury, fearing additions would be demanded in the form of fruit-baskets, parcels, and, who knows? bulky store-boxes, had always forgotten to ask him to do so till it was too late.

But to-day he had received too much news from the pilot boat to risk leaving his wife in ignorance of what would be certain to be in the mouth of everyone in the community before the afternoon was half over. So he went on, regardless of all minor considerations :

"The Consul is on board, and his wife, too."

Mrs. Drury's fork clattered on to her plate without her even noticing it.

"What did you say, Oliver?"

But Oliver's mouth was too full of dangerous fish-bones to allow of a speedy answer. So Mrs. Drury went on :

"Consul's wife? You must be dreaming. What Consul? A new man? Then where will Mr. Reynolds go when he comes out? Is there a general shift of places? Why did you take that fish, Oliver? I'm certain it isn't fresh."

Fresh or not, Mr. Drury's plate and mouth were both empty, and he was in a condition to impart more news.

"My dear Patricia, here is the passenger list. You see it is headed by Consul and Mrs. Reynolds. Then there are the Duc de Borny, from Canton, in young Alison's place, and Angus Murray out again for the tea-season. Now you know nearly as much as I do."

"Mrs. Reynolds," said Mrs. Drury in a meditative voice, turning over the paper as though in the hopes of finding some general remarks or foot-notes on the blank side. "But you don't at all know that Mr. Reynolds is married, Oliver. We must all have heard about such a thing as that months ago."

Besides, he would certainly have told me, if no one else. It must be his mother, or aunt, or sister-in-law."

But Mr. Drury had of course made enquiries of the pilot, and could affirm on this point that the Mrs. Reynolds was young and beyond doubt Mr. Reynolds' wife. More than this he did not know. Everyone would see for themselves before long, for the *Taiwan* would be in the harbour in another two hours.

"I cannot understand it! You mean to say that Mr. Reynolds, without saying a word to anyone, has gone and got married to—Heaven knows whom!" cried Mrs. Drury. "You don't seem to see it in a proper light, Oliver! A man goes home for a year's leave of absence, writes occasionally to his friends out here, is reported to be coming out by some particular steamer, and then appears with a wife, forsooth! Believe me, there must be something wrong about the whole affair. Who is this girl? Probably someone he has picked up in London. Very likely not respectable! You don't see how very awkward it is for me, Oliver! What am I to do?"

For Mr. Drury had risen from the table, and was in the act of lighting his cigar previous to going back to his office.

"I can't follow your train of reasoning, Patricia, so I'm off." And he slowly moved towards the door. This was too much for Mrs. Drury's patience.

"That won't do now," she said peremptorily, intercepting his retreat. "You must and shall give me a direct answer. What am I to do?"

Brought to bay in this fashion, Mr. Drury lowered his flag.

"My dear Patricia," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder, "there is nothing to be done. I do not imagine that because Mr. Reynolds did not tell you he was being married his wife is necessarily not respectable. There might have been a thousand reasons——"

"A thousand fiddlesticks!" stormed Mrs. Drury, shaking off the hand that had been meant to soothe her. "Do men generally go and get married in a corner when they have arrived at Mr. Reynolds' age and position? Do they bring them out to a place like Kantow without telling at least one of the other ladies? Don't these things appeal to your sense of right and propriety? Or have you none?"

"Don't excite yourself, Patricia," said Mr. Drury, in what was intended to be a conciliatory tone. "And don't be prejudiced against a person whom you may find after all a very pleasant addition to your society. Good-by." And the Commissioner escaped with more speed than courtesy.

In less than half a minute he was outside the gate, and making towards the Custom House. The fog was lifting a little, and now he could just imagine he saw the *Taiwan's* masts looming through the haze. The fog indeed was lifting from the sea to cling still more closely round the hills that guarded the river's mouth. The only thing that seemed to be present to Mr. Drury's mind all the time he was walking down to his office was this *Taiwan*, and the only thing he was calculating was the height of these same masts. For, like a true philosopher that he was, Oliver Drury had already made up his mind to accept what he was sure would be inevitable as regarded the new Mr. Reynolds and his wife. Mrs. Drury was already prejudiced against her, and the two would be enemies. Socially, the Reynoldses would be written off their list. That might have been awkward in a business way between the Consul and the Commissioner, but would not make any difference between this particular Consul and this particular Commissioner. Mrs. Drury might be wrong in her guesses, but she was equally likely to be right. At any rate Oliver Drury did not care. He was not a lady's man, and did not choose their society. Still, it was a pity that the Consul had not

written to Mrs. Drury beforehand. However, he had, no doubt, his reasons.

And by this time he had reached the Custom House, and turned into his office ready for work. For the *Taiwan's* arrival had put life into each member of the Custom House staff, from the Commissioner downwards.

First, there was young Tom Alison, his favourite assistant, who by reason of his speedily approaching departure was completely demoralised for work. He was sitting on the table in the General Office, kicking his legs and talking to Angus Murray, the only one of the *Taiwan's* passengers who had come on shore in the pilot boat. Angus was a handsome, dissipated-looking young fellow, a very good tea-taster, and a great favourite with both men and women. Of course, he was perfectly aware of his good points, and esteemed himself highly in consequence. Tom and he were whispering together when Mr. Drury came in, and giggling much after the fashion affected by school-girls. The other assistant, a man with a large family, was writing with an injured air in one corner. The Commissioner greeted Murray and went to work.

"Sir," said Tom Alison about an hour later, "the *Taiwan* is coming in now. Can I go on board and see the Consul?"

"I'm going myself, and you can come too," came back the answer. "Has Murray given you a description of the lady?"

For a minute Tom looked about him, as though to see that no inconvenient tidewaiter was at hand to hear. Then he came closer to Mr. Drury, and said in a mysterious whisper :

"She will be an eye-opener, you bet !"

CHAPTER II.

Mr. Drury looked up, took a hasty survey of the outer office, and then said, in a tone of intense curiosity :

"What do you mean, Alison? Is she queer?"

"No, she's only stunning fun. I want to see her awfully. Fancy old Reynolds marrying a ballet-girl! My gracious, what will the ladies say?" And Tom went off into a fit of laughter, in which he seemed rather surprised that the Commissioner did not join him.

"A ballet-girl! Did Murray tell you that? I am astonished." Aghast would have been a more appropriate word, for Mr. Drury was quite pale at the thought that he would have to break this dreadful news to his wife.

"Come, not quite so bad as that. She was a comic actress, that's all, one of those who dress up like men, and do the principal parts. Pretty, too, and heaps of go in her. I wish I were going to stay," said Tom in a soothing voice.

"Oh, a comic actress. That's not quite so bad," groaned Mr. Drury. "She must have been quiet, to marry Reynolds. Does she look like an actress? Shall we have to tell the ladies about her?"

Tom looked at the Commissioner, whose head was bent once more over his writing. There was a shade of pity in the glance. But he said, quite casually :

"It would be best to keep all that dark, I suppose. I'll get Murray to be mum. Shall I order the gig, Sir?"

"Yes." And the Commissioner got up from his chair, took his hat and went outside.

It was so foggy that he could not see even as far as the boat-house, some twenty yards in front of where he was standing. But he could hear something, a sound which made him, good-tempered as he was, bite his lip and mutter something under his breath. Tramp, tramp, tramp, sounded the regular tread of four chair-coolies coming down the hill close behind him. There was only one lady in the place who kept four coolies for her chair, and that lady was the one person in the world he least wanted to see at that particular moment. In short, it was Mrs. Drury herself.

"What made you come here, Patricia?" asked her husband in what was for him a severe tone of voice. "I'm just going on board the *Taiwan*. Do you want anything from me?"

"I am going, too," announced Mrs. Drury, getting out of her chair. "I am one of Mr. Reynolds' oldest friends, and I have to go and congratulate him, though I may not approve of his choice." And she shook out the folds of her skirt as she spoke, with the air of a woman who has finally made up her mind.

"But, my dear," expostulated the Commissioner, somewhat feebly, it is true, "it is not convenient that you should go on board. I am going, and Alison, and there will be de Borny to come back, too."

"De Borny can go in a sampan!" said Mrs. Drury, decidedly. "Come along now, there is Mr. Alison to say the boat is ready." And she moved off so quickly that Mr. Drury had not time to do anything but follow her.

"Are you not afraid of the damp, Patricia?" the Commissioner asked as they came close to the jetty. It was only a straw to clutch at, but Mrs. Drury affected a delicate throat, and

might be induced by consideration of it to turn back even at the eleventh hour.

However, she did not even hear him now. The jetty was a sloping stone one, very irregularly built, with shaking flags and perilous holes. In between these last Mrs. Drury was picking her way, grasping Tom Alison's arm firmly. He had given in altogether from the first moment he had perceived Mrs. Drury, and was receiving his reward in the form of an invitation to dinner that evening, with the additional consolation that, if Mrs. Reynolds was anything like a proper person, she would be invited too.

Tom looked over his shoulder at the Commissioner, whose handsome good-humoured face wore rather an uneasy expression. But he did not respond to the young man's telegraphed signal to speak. Mr. Drury had now made up his mind to let things take what course they pleased. When Mrs. Drury took up a position as regarded another woman, he must leave her to fight it out as she chose.

The distance from the Customs jetty to where the *Taiwan* was anchored was not very great. Happily for the safety of the crew in this foggy weather, Mrs. Drury did not volunteer to steer, she having arrayed herself in her newest Parisian gown. For, as all women know, a first appearance in a becoming dress is everything decisive between women and women. And Mrs. Drury, the leader of fashion and society in Kantow, must have her position recognised from the very beginning by the new-comer.

Still, as the Commissioner brought up the gig alongside the steamer, and the stout weather-beaten old captain hailed her with a slight accent of surprise from the top of the gangway, her husband at any rate felt that she had somewhat compromised her dignity in coming on board for what was, after all, in plain English, only common curiosity. Mr. Drury even wished he had told her a little more distinctly not to come. However, the lady was master of the situation, and called out :

"I am coming up, Captain. Is Mr. Reynolds on board?"

"Yes, certainly," answered another voice, and a tall thin figure peeped over the captain's shoulders, and immediately disappeared again. Mrs. Drury toiled up the gangway, closely followed by the Commissioner and Tom Alison.

The deck of the *Taiwan* was of course littered with boxes, baskets and packages of all descriptions. The captain greeted Mrs. Drury cordially, and then turned round to make room for the Consul, who had altogether disappeared from sight.

"Where are you, Consul?" Mrs. Drury called out once more, and Mr. Reynolds edged round the corner of the deck-house much after the fashion of a naughty school-boy who fears the voice of his master. Horribly guilty indeed he looked, and not at all the happy bridegroom. But this did not surprise Mrs. Drury, in fact it rather flattered her self-conceit to think that Mr. Reynolds should be afraid of meeting her.

"We are come to congratulate you, you naughty man!" she said in a playful tone. "Why did you not tell us you were getting married?"

"Thank you very much," said Mr. Reynolds hurriedly. He was always very hurried and nervous with ladies. "I hope you and my wife will be very good friends, Mrs. Drury. Indeed I do."

All the while he was saying this the Consul was casting furtive glances, now at Mr. Drury, who stood drumming with his fingers on a seat, now at Tom Alison and the captain, who were talking in an aside, and still more frequently at the door that led down into the saloon, and from which sounds of mirth were issuing.

"Where is Mrs. Reynolds?" asked Mrs. Drury, after an awkward pause, during which the sounds of merriment had seemed to wax louder and louder.

"Oh, packing up. She'll be delighted to see you; I told her all about you. I'll call her," and Mr. Reynolds hurried off

to the companion. Mrs. Drury followed him, for the fog was now beginning to turn to a fine rain, and she had suddenly remembered her delicate throat.

A strong smell of cigarette-smoke was wafted up to her as she stepped inside the door, and at the same moment she heard a lively young voice say :

"Bother Mrs. Drury. Who's she? I must finish my cigarette first."

"Hush!" came in Mr. Reynolds' nervous voice. "Come along, Isabel, there's a good child."

"Chains won't drag me from here till I've finished this cigarette. Go up and amuse her yourself."

Then Mrs. Drury thought it more prudent to retreat to the deck. She was just in a safe position to be free from all suspicion of eavesdropping when Mr. Reynolds came up again, rather red, and stammering out excuses that his wife would come in an instant. Mrs. Drury looked very searchingly at him, as though to find out from some change in his appearance how he had got pitchforked into this strange kind of matrimony. But he was just the same as he had been before he went home—a lean, ill-favoured looking man with a failure as regarded moustache and beard, sandy hair, ill-fitting coat, ill-washed hands. Mrs. Reynolds had evidently not cared much about her husband's outward appearance.

"We were very much surprised to hear this morning you were married," the lady went on. "If you had told us, I could have put the house into a little order, and made it more comfortable for Mrs. Reynolds. Why didn't you write?" she asked after a pause, with an effort to get Mr. Reynolds to look straight at her.

But the Consul dodged her glance, and hurriedly put up his hand, ostensibly to stroke his chin, but with an instinctive attitude of self-defence that tickled Tom Alison's sense of the

ludicrous intensely. Happily the Commissioner came to the rescue, and remarked cheerfully :

"We are very glad to have you back, Reynolds. We have been piling up lots of work for you. Have you seen Vernon yet?"

Vernon was the man who had been Acting Consul in Mr. Reynolds' absence.

"He's coming now," called out Alison, who, now that Mr. Drury had changed the course of the conversation, and anticipating no more fun, had betaken himself to the side of the ship. And sure enough the Consular gig, flying the flag and rowed by four chattering Chinese boatmen, was just trying to come up somewhere near the gangway. Kantow river has a very swift tide, and it requires considerable skill to steer across the current and arrive alongside a steamer without getting some damage. Mr. Vernon, a young man with eye-glasses and a turn for Chinese, was very much out of his element steering a gig. And, for at least five minutes, the attention of the captain, the Commissioner, the Consul and Tom Alison was fully taken up by wondering over what object he would be capsized first—the buoy to which the steamer was fastened, the sides of the *Taiwan* herself, the cargo-boats that were beginning to swarm round, like ants round a dainty morsel; or if, finally, his head or that of the head boatman's would first be battered to pieces against the gangway. And when they had hauled the hapless Mr. Vernon up on deck, and were ready to see new things, they found that Mrs. Drury had forestalled them. For there she stood, and opposite to her was the Mrs. Reynolds they had so long been waiting for. Mr. Reynolds stood half behind her, peeping round the corner as though to see what impression his wife was making.

Mrs. Drury saw a tall, well-developed girl of some 23 years of age coming out of the companion, and walking straight up to her in the most easy fashion. This "young person," as

Mrs. Drury afterwards termed her, at least to herself, was without doubt a good-looking individual. Her face was round and rosy, her eyes large and blue, her hair, of very dark brown, was cut close to her head. This gave her a somewhat masculine appearance, which, though softened by the fact that the hair was curly, was yet further borne out by the dress. She wore a dark blue jersey, with an open sailor's collar and scarf. The sleeves of this jersey were tucked up to the elbow, perhaps for the purpose of showing two very white and beautifully shaped arms. Her skirt was somewhat short, and showed a pair of good-sized shooting boots, with perhaps just a glimmer of a red stocking above them. And in her hand she dangled a blue Tam O'Shanter, after the most approved aquatic style.

But what struck the greatest amazement into the heart of Mrs. Drury was the perfect calmness of this young lady's behaviour. She came out, shook hands with Mrs. Drury without any introduction, and then said :

"When are we going on shore, Consul? I am sick of being on board."

"My dear," said Mr. Reynolds hurriedly, making a step forward, "this is Mrs. Drury, and allow me to introduce my wife to you, Mr. Drury, and to you, Mr. Vernon, and to you, Mr. Alison."

The group of men approached and shook hands with Mrs. Reynolds. It was curious to Mrs. Drury, who had to stand on one side and look on, how each man, according to his natural disposition, received and returned Mrs. Reynolds' hearty handshake. The Commissioner, who was the first one, seemed a little surprised at the vigour with which his hand was shaken, and not altogether pleased. Mr. Vernon looked as though his thin small hand had been most terribly injured. And Tom Alison evidently enjoyed it much, and wrung Mrs. Reynolds' hand in return as though it had been a pump-handle. Then they both looked up and smiled. And Mrs. Drury took a mental note thereof.

It is always more or less an awkward position to occupy, that of watching an introduction. When they had all shaken hands, the Commissioner and Mr. Vernon found themselves also quite in the shade, for Tom Alison, with the careless ease of a very young man, took the wind out of all the other sails by rattling forth a volley of commonplaces and so drawing Mrs. Reynolds' attention exclusively to his own person. Mrs. Drury began to feel rather snubbed, and therefore angry. But the arrival of another personage on the scene made her, at least outwardly, appear in her ordinary society frame of mind.

A very tall young man, thin, not as a whipping-post but as a sheet of blotting-paper, dressed in the very loudest and most comic-looking of homespun suits, with an exaggeratedly waxed black moustache and closely cropped hair, had strolled up the companion after Mrs. Reynolds and now stood beside Mrs. Drury, looking on at the scene.

It was the new assistant in the Customs, the Duc de Borny, for now he so styled himself, having gradually gone through the preliminary stages of Viscount, Count and Marquis which seem so strangely to have to be passed through by illustrious foreigners in the Far East. Of course Mrs. Drury knew him well by name and reputation, for a young Frenchman can scarcely be the fastest and most dissipated man in several small communities without becoming notorious. And it now seemed to her something more than a curious coincidence, say a special destiny, that Kantow should be receiving on one and the same day the de Borny of China, a Jehu and Ahab rolled in one, and a Consul's wife who had come from the Lord knows where. But as herself the head of the Customs, to speak socially, in Kantow, it did not befit her to turn the cold shoulder on the young man before he had in any way committed himself in the place. And so while Mr. Reynolds, the Commissioner and Mr. Vernon were talking together, no doubt on important public business, since their eyes were not

attempting to meet each other's, but were all fixed on a certain round blue cap, and while Tom Alison and the bride were bandying words, Mrs. Drury moved majestically nearer to de Borny and offered him her hand.

The young man made her a most profound bow and addressed her in fluent English. But before Mrs. Drury had time to respond, Mrs. Reynolds had turned round abruptly with :

"Oh, you've come up at last, then ! Let's go on shore at once."

The Duc de Borny looked from the one lady to the other, and Mrs. Reynolds, perceiving that she had somehow or other made a mistake, hastened to say : "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Drury. I didn't mean to take the Duke away from you."

"It is quite immaterial," said Mrs. Drury with a sweet smile, for she felt herself once more mistress of the situation. "I am just going on shore. Good afternoon, Mrs. Reynolds." And she swept towards the group of men, who had left off their conversation to watch the behaviour of the two ladies.

"The gig, please." And in a very few minutes the Commissioner and Mrs. Drury, and Tom Alison, to his great regret, were out in the stream and steering back to the Customs jetty.

CHAPTER III.

The distance had been traversed in total silence. The Commissioner had been fully occupied with his steering. Tom Alison was chuckling over some parting joke. And Mrs. Drury was nursing up her wrath at what she very justifiably denounced in her mind as the extreme rudeness of the new-comer.

To have met Mrs. Drury on deck, just shaken hands with her, and then not address a single syllable to her again, but devote herself to a boy on £300 or £400 a year, and not even take any notice of the Commissioner! It made Mrs. Drury's blood boil. What, be treated like a school-girl, or a servant, by a girl of that age, who very likely had neither father nor mother to boast of, and certainly could never have possessed a grandfather! And to Mrs. Drury, too, the cousin of a baronet, the wife of the Commissioner of Customs, the person without whose leave no dog dared wag its tail in all North Formosa! There could only be one of two explanations for such astounding conduct: either the girl was mad, or she had never been in the society of a lady before, and therefore did not know how to behave towards one.

No, Mrs. Drury knew no more what to do, now that she had seen the monster, than she had done before. And she could not consult Mr. Drury now, even if he were willing to give advice, because there was a certain feeling of pride which kept her back from showing before Tom Alison that she had been mortified

by her reception on board the *Taiwan*. And so when she got out of the gig and walked up to her chair on her husband's arm, she made no remark on the expedition. But Mr. Drury shook his head to himself when he heard the order given to the chair-coolies: "Go Number Two Haikwan." For he himself was the Number One Haikwan, and the "Number Two Haikwan Missey," a Mrs. Clay, mother of six blooming children, was Mrs. Drury's most devoted slave and general recipient of all manner of gossip, scandal, slander and evil-speaking.

There was a general stampede of small children towards the door when Mrs. Drury's coolies had deposited their burden in the verandah of Mrs. Clay's house. The door was flung violently open by a boy of about eight years of age, who was being hotly pursued, perhaps on account of a half-devoured banana he held in one hand, by a girl a year or two younger, weeping copiously and audibly. Mrs. Drury escaped these two youthful fiends to fall into a snare laid just inside the door, consisting of two or three lamps, a case of petroleum, a tray and several glasses half-full of various liquids. These perils again passed she reached the drawing-room door, from whence she could see two more children, one lying on the rug and the other on the sofa, while the mother herself was sitting at a writing-table, evidently trying to write some chits.

"You haven't got any of the children ill again, surely," said Mrs. Drury towards Mrs. Clay's back ere either of the two children could give the alarm.

Mrs. Clay gave a start as though she had been shot. She was a woman of weak nerves, clad in a grey knitted shawl, who suffered terribly if anyone suddenly addressed her, more especially from an unseen quarter.

"Oh, it is you, Mrs. Drury," she gasped out. "I did not hear you come in." And fully conscious of the difference between Mrs. Drury's Parisian gown and her own morning

dress, which was pre-eminently that of the mother of a family, she crossed the room and led Mrs. Drury to a seat.

"Yes, the children have got whooping-cough, and I was just writing you a chit to ask if you could not lend me some raspberry vinegar. I am quite out of it."

Mrs. Clay was in a perpetual state of being out of every imaginable article of food and dress. However, Mrs. Drury never resented or refused her requests, whether they might be for a reel of cotton or a bottle of port wine. Nor did she furnish the improvident Mrs. Clay with goods for the sake of putting her under obligations. For with all her other faults Mrs. Drury was a kind-hearted woman, and besides dearly loved to make a fuss.

"Yes, you shall have it," she answered, and Mrs. Clay's face brightened. Then there was a silence for a few minutes, during which the children, probably finding the room dull, betook themselves to another region.

"I have just come from the *Taiwan*," remarked Mrs. Drury. She had known all along that the conversation must begin and end with herself. Mrs. Clay never rose much beyond smiling and showing all her teeth, except when the subject discussed was babies.

"Yes: is she in?" asked Mrs. Clay. Her attention was probably being distracted by sounds of heavily falling objects in the room to which the children had betaken themselves.

"Mr. Reynolds has come back—married," went on Mrs. Drury, with an impressive pause before the last word.

"So Mr. Clay told me at tiffin. Is she nice?"

This was almost too much for Mrs. Drury's patience. But still she felt she was capable of making a grand impression yet, even on a Mrs. Clay. So she shifted her chair in a mysterious manner, and, leaning forward, addressed Mrs. Clay in an undertone.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Clay, I am very afraid. I only hope, for the poor dear man's sake, that I may be wrong."

"Wrong in what?" asked Mrs. Clay in something like a terrified voice. "Has she any disease?"

"Morally, or mentally, if you mean, dear Mrs. Clay, I'm afraid I can't answer you. But our mothers, your dear mother, Mrs. Clay, and mine, what would they say to us now? And shut up in such a small community, too, we who have been so particularly fortunate in the members of it—ah, I fear, I fear!"

"What do you mean, dear Mrs. Drury? Is she mad, then?" asked Mrs. Clay in an excited tone. "How dreadful that will be. I wonder if she's violent."

"No, dear Mrs. Clay, not mad, I hope, but"—here Mrs. Drury broke off abruptly, and required to be entreated most pathetically by Mrs. Clay before she could continue her narrative.

But just at that juncture, when the excitement of Mrs. Clay had been worked up to boiling-point, and Mrs. Drury herself felt that the moment had come for speaking, a tramp of coolies at the door announced the arrival of another visitor, who was forthwith ushered into the drawing-room.

The new-comer, by name Mrs. De Lacy Smith, was the wife of the oldest resident in Kantow. Mr. and Mrs. Smith, who since their last voyage to England, some seven years since, had adopted the pre-name De Lacy, were a stout, elderly couple, he a very wealthy tea-merchant, she a motherly, slightly vulgar, but highly estimable dame. Of course she possessed a few illusions as regarded her own person and powers, dating probably from the time when she had been the prettiest girl in South China. But these foibles were very excusable, and if anything rather added to her charm by making her friends feel in a delightful uncertainty as to how she would be disposed towards them next time they met. All the young men artistically inclined submitted their drawings to her criticism, before going

on to laugh over these same criticisms at Mrs. Drury's. It is doubtful whether there could have been Divine Service in the little chapel on the hill if Mr. De Lacy Smith, or at any rate his wife, had not graced the building with their presence. The organising and arranging of the choir was entirely in her hands, and she really acquitted herself to the satisfaction of everyone in all her undertakings.

"Dear Mrs. De Lacy Smith!" cried Mrs. Drury enthusiastically, entirely eclipsing Mrs. Clay in her reception of her visitor. "I am so glad you have come. I was just going on to your house to ask your advice about something."

"Well, dear," answered the stout elderly lady in her most genial voice, "you know you are always welcome to my advice. What is it about?"

Mrs. Drury only wanted an opening for speech. In a very few moments her two hearers were listening—Mrs. Clay with alarm, Mrs. De Lacy Smith with the grave air of a judge—to Mrs. Drury's account of her suspicions at the tiffin-table, concerning the new-comer, and the confirmation of them on board the *Taiwan*. The presence and share of de Borny, an old aversion of Mrs. Smith's, did not lose in the telling. The bride herself had her full meed of looks given to her. Mrs. Drury was too wise to cast doubts on the rest of her story by risking what would be apparent to all—but the bride's manner of dress came in for blame. And last, but not least, her tone and behaviour to the various men who had come on board to meet her, put the finishing touch to Mrs. Drury's picture.

When she paused at length, rather from want of breath than of words, Mrs. Clay was looking intently at Mrs. Smith, as though to learn her view of the matter from her face. That worthy lady was deliberately taking off her gloves, stretching each one out, and laying the fingers evenly side by side. Mrs. Drury looked on at this process for about two minutes,

but finding the oracle did not seem inclined to speak, she opened the campaign herself. "Now, Mrs. Smith, what are we ladies to do? Are we to introduce into our set, just because she happens to be the Consul's wife, a girl of no antecedents whatsoever, who has not a notion how to behave, and who evidently does not want to learn manners? Or are we to make a stand against this, and teach her she can't be insulting to us without suffering for it?"

"It is very awkward for everybody, my dear," said Mrs. Smith, putting one plump hand on Mrs. Drury's knee. "You see, it is awkward for Mrs. Clay and me, because we have never seen Mrs. Reynolds."

"But you can take my account of her as well as though you had seen her!" cried Mrs. Drury, whose little tinge of Irish blood made her quick-tempered. "Besides, there is Mr. Alison, and Mr. Vernon, and my husband."

"Yes, yes, dear," soothed Mrs. Smith. "But you will find it awkward yourself to shut her out of society, that is unless you can prove she is not respectable."

"How can we tell if she is?" put in Mrs. Clay. "One can't ask to see certificates of birth and marriage. And even if one could, that wouldn't clear all the years of her life."

"Mr. Reynolds would not marry anyone but a respectable person, or rather no one but a respectable person would marry Mr. Reynolds," laughed Mrs. Smith. "He is not so attractive, nor so rich either." For Mr. Reynolds was no favourite with this good-natured lady.

"Well, but what are we to do?" asked Mrs. Clay again. She felt that she would like to have a line of conduct marked out for her by these two magnates, and have her own conscience freed from all responsibility. But Mrs. Smith only said: "I look upon what Mrs. Drury has told us as a warning. We must be all on the look-out for the straws that will tell us how the wind blows. Unless my husband has any objections, I for one must go and call

on her. But I shall make no attempt at intimacy till I see how she means to behave here. After all, we must give everyone a chance of as pleasant a life as they can manage in this place."

"I don't quite see your train of reasoning," said Mrs. Drury, a little hotly. "I think we should all adopt a uniform line of conduct, and make Mrs. Reynolds conform to it. However, that's only my opinion after all, and I don't want to influence you."

And she rose to go.

"Not at all, not at all, dear Mrs. Drury" cried Mrs. Clay, fearing she was offended. "We will all act together, won't we, Mrs. Smith? Only we shouldn't be unkind to Mr. Reynolds."

"Unkind to Mr. Fiddlesticks!" retorted Mrs. Drury. "Didn't I tell you he's ashamed of her already, and will be apologising for her all round the place in another week, I expect? Don't you know him better than that? Has he ever said or done anything without eating it up again directly? Now, isn't that true, Mrs. Smith?"

Mrs. Smith, before whose mental vision floated several encounters between her husband and the Consul, in which the latter had invariably eaten humble pie, was forced to assent. But it was evident that Mrs. Drury's story had rather excited her curiosity than raised her anger. Or perhaps it may have been that she felt Kantow was too small a community to miss a new sensation for the sake of keeping up its dignity. So all the satisfaction Mrs. Drury got out of her was this:

"I shall not do anything, dear, till I have consulted my husband and taken his advice."

In matters social Mrs. De Lacy Smith's deference to her husband's opinion was little more than an empty form. But Mrs. Clay whispered, as she escorted Mrs. Drury to her chair:

"I shall not call, Mrs. Drury, till you tell me more about her."

However, she must speedily have forgotten her promise, for within the next quarter-of-an-hour she had arranged with Mrs. Smith that they should call together at the Consulate two days hence.

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Reynolds had had few more miserable moments in his life than those he had spent on board the *Taiwan* the day she came into Kantow river, and when he was, in very truth, on his own ground.

He had never been a particularly warlike or energetic man, though on the other hand he had never done anything particularly foolish,—that is, of course, up to the present time. From his very earliest years he had been cautious and fearful of making a mistake,—in short, what is popularly styled “a well.” Perchance the well in this case was empty, but at any rate it did no harm. So he had got on in the Consular service, and at the age of 42 was Consul at Kantow, with instructions to open the trade of the island of Formosa as much as possible to British merchants.

Mr. Reynolds was pleased and the Government was pleased. They, so to speak, washed their hands of all further claims on account of his negative merits. Not so the British merchants, even after he had been but a short time in the place. For Mr. Reynolds was so afraid of doing wrong that he never could be induced to do anything at all. Or, worse still, he promised everything and did nothing. The table-drawers and pigeon-holes in his office were filled with papers and notes, most of them worthless, but representing an enormous waste of time on the

Consul's part and endless vexations on that of the British merchants. But, unless one of them had actually held a pistol at his head, an illegal proceeding doubtless, he could scarcely hope for any attention to his grievances before indeed the grievances had ceased to exist or he himself had left off grieving for disgust.

So it had come about that Mr. Reynolds was no favourite in Kantow ; and this in spite of Mrs. Drury's patronage. Mr. Drury, good-natured fellow that he was, got on with him capitally socially, and despised him thoroughly officially. Mr. De Lacy Smith quarrelled with him about once a month, and made it up over a whisky-and-soda at the Club. The younger men laughed at and caricatured him. Still, he was useful at picnics and parties, if only as a butt, and the ladies could never complain of any want of courtesy on his part.

So matters had stood when he had gone home to England on leave, a year ago. Why he went, no one exactly knew, scarcely when he went. He disappeared very much in the same manner as he was accustomed to retire from any festivity. That is to say, he announced that he was going by a certain steamer and on a certain day. Accordingly, a grand festivity, *jambarree* as it is called in South China, was held in his honour. The liquors flowed freely, and so did the wit of the assembly. Then the whole party conducted the Consul on board the steamer, which was to start at daylight the next morning. But to their utter astonishment, not to say horror, he walked quietly into the Club the next evening at his usual time. No one knew why he had not gone away that morning ; the captain himself only discovered the fact when he was half-way to Amoy. But again the next day Mr. Reynolds disappeared, and it was finally ascertained that he had crossed in a sailing ship, which only reached the mainland some eight or ten days afterwards.

Very characteristic, said or jeered all the Kantow community. They knew well enough that the Consul had a holy horror of

making up his mind, even to leaving a drawing-room. He was only clever at backing out of a situation. But though he was always asking for instructions from the British Minister at Peking, yet it was so much of a relief to the worthy officials there to have so many letters to pigeon-hole, and so much less real business to attend to, that the Legation really rather missed him when he was at home on leave. And, as a man who was perfectly safe to be neutral between the Chinese authorities and all foreigners, his presence was really valuable in the island of Formosa. Besides, it would have been a matter of some difficulty to get a man of seniority and pretensions to stay in the island for an unlimited period of time. The inhabitants of the treaty ports of China hold that the island of Formosa is the hot-bed of all fevers and diseases. The people who live there are sincerely pitied, and their speedy death expected. Now Mr. Reynolds was fairly hardened to all climates, and capable of absorbing all kinds of tasteless or nauseous food. And so he went home, and made no complaints at the Foreign Office, but proceeded to enjoy himself in his own peculiar fashion.

He could not exactly remember how he came to know Miss Isabel Dunbar, one of the more subordinate but still very pretty young ladies who were playing in *La Vie* at the Avenue Theatre. The comic opera had always had a great fascination for him, and the girls there who acted so charmingly, if not modestly, he ranked very high in his category of beauties. He got introduced behind the scenes by a China friend, who was no other than Angus Murray himself, and of course fell in love with Isabel. What attraction a very healthy, rather bouncing girl could have had for a man of Mr. Reynolds' calibre, it is difficult to say. Certainly the heat and lights, and the general effect of pretty forms moving about, and noise and laughter everywhere, made Mr. Reynolds more brilliant in repartee behind the scenes than he was anywhere else. Angus

himself, who was very much smitten with Miss Isabel, saw with a shade of terror how the second night he was to conduct his Consul thither, that gentleman had provided himself with a brand new dress suit of most fashionable cut. Of course the fair Isabel preferred the younger man, but as he was not at all inclined to come to the scratch, having indeed no intention of marrying and burdening himself with a wife, to Mr. Reynolds' great joy he was left master of the field, and in a few days found himself engaged to Miss Isabel Dunbar.

It may seem astonishing that the brilliant young lady herself should have been willing to give up the stage and retire into private life. But indeed Isabel had found her life mostly tinsel—certainly very little gold. She was wretchedly paid, scarcely enough to make both ends meet. She had many improvident relations, who periodically invaded her and took away the little she had. Her looks, so the manager of the theatre often assured her, would not last. She had no prospect of any rise in the scale, for she had gone on the stage too late in life, though then she was only twenty-two, to be able to afford the years of training that alone can ensure success. And Mr. Reynolds' title and position, magnified intensely by Angus Murray in his desire to shake off their inconvenient intimacy, dazzled her. Still she hung back from marriage in a properly coy way, and poor Mr. Reynolds was not quite sure, even when he went to the appointed church on the appointed day, four or five weeks before he was to come out to China again, whether he would not find that she had "eloped with a Horse Guard Blue" or any of the famous personages of street ballads.

Of course they both repented of what they had done before the voyage was half over. Not before they had started, for Isabel was too busy buying all the things she had ever fancied to take much notice of her husband, and he was kept up to the mark of admiration and satisfaction by the praises lavished

on his wife by all the bachelors of his acquaintance—and Mr. Reynolds' circle of lady-friends in England was small. But it was on board the Messageries steamer that the cloven hoof began to show itself. There could be no doubt that Isabel Reynolds did not contrast favourably with the very select company of ladies bound for the Mediterranean ports, Egypt and Colombo. She was too loud and noisy, and besides had a very sharp tongue for her own sex. Certainly there was plenty of excuse for her, since she had been systematically snubbed by her *prima donnas*, and again had snubbed her subordinates unmercifully at the theatre. But the world is not always ready to make excuses, and it was besides very awkward for Mr. Reynolds to keep the peace and yet silence about his wife's past life. Isabel herself was very difficult to deal with also. If Mr. Reynolds ventured on a mild expostulation, generally very mild indeed, he was met with a flood of tears or an outburst of indignation. The tears ended in red eyes, the indignation made Isabel's voice sharper and her accent more unrefined than usual. Luckily, the ladies gave in by departing from the steamer at their various destinations. But Mr. Reynolds was left trembling, and yet hoping, fearing but longing to know, how his wife would get on at Kantow.

There were not many ladies to quarrel with, but those few were Mr. Reynolds' special friends. Mrs. De Lacy Smith and Mrs. Clay he was not in great dread of. The one was too old, the other too eaten up with children to care to come into competition, much less rivalry, with the Consul's wife. But Mrs. Drury, the great and splendid Mrs. Drury! Mr. Reynolds quaked at the thought of her. She was neither young nor old, but at the most dangerous age of all to meet with a young woman of Isabel's looks and manners. Could Kantow bear two mistresses? Would Mrs. Drury knuckle under to an Isabel Dunbar, late of the Avenue Theatre? Or would Isabel be the

one to give in, and gracefully take a back seat? Mr. Reynolds could not conceive either situation. No, there was terrible trouble ahead for him, and he bewailed inwardly his luckless fate which had arranged matters so that, while Angus Murray could carry on an amusing little flirtation all the voyage out, and yet find himself free as air in Kantow, he, the Consul, was saddled with this white elephant, which had already proved costly and would most likely prove dangerous.

Thus moaning much over spilt milk, Mr. Reynolds was leading the way up to the Consulate. They had landed at the Consular jetty, like the Customs one in most respects except that it was longer and the stones more evenly put together, and Mr. Vernon was following Isabel and de Borny, laden with many and sundry wraps. Eight or ten Chinamen were lounging about the boat-house as they passed it; these men were soldiers, "braves" as they are called, and were fine-looking, stalwart fellows, albeit somewhat villainous in countenance; Isabel gazed at them in some curiosity, and they returned her gaze with a shout of laughter. This, of course, made her feel indignant, but as even de Borny only whispered to her to hurry on, and made no attempt at chastising them, her indignation found its vent in words.

"Consul" (such was the name by which she invariably addressed her husband) "will you order these men away?"

"I can't, my dear," said Mr. Reynolds hurriedly. "Come along and don't look at them."

Isabel felt inclined to make a stand and fight it out, but the others were all moving on and she thought better of it. De Borny put in: "They are all ruffians, these soldiers, Mrs. Reynolds. The scum of the empire. You must always keep out of their way. See, they are following us now."

And so they continued to do all the way up the very steep hill, making remarks doubtless of an edifying nature, since

de Borny kept on grinning to himself and Mr. Vernon kept on blushing. It is not always an advantage to be acquainted with the Chinese language.

But now a flight of steps leading up to a great brown gate, over which spread out the immense branches of a beautiful banian tree, appeared directly above them in the mist. De Borny raised his cap and took leave, and Mr. Vernon likewise departed. And the strangely assorted couple entered their own domain, and Isabel for the first time for many years possessed a home of her own.

And a most beautiful home, too, as she was forced to admit to herself next morning, when the fog had cleared away and the beautiful spring air was coming in through the open windows, and the genial, not yet glaring, sun was dressing up all the landscape in its brightest colours. Isabel was standing in a long verandah which ran along three sides of the bungalow which served as the Consulate dwelling-house. It was perched high up on a hill, which suddenly fell away at a little distance in front of the house, the ground disappearing in a mass of jungly ferns, grasses, cactus and banians. Over and through this jungle could be seen, far below, a wide river swiftly flowing out to where, some half-mile to the right, a line of white breakers marked where the bar lay. Across the river, which was of no mean size or depth, rose almost straight from the shore a beautifully green hill, some fifteen hundred feet in height, with peak after peak seeming to peep round its shoulder: some rounded, others conical, as though a breath of volcanic fire had passed over them. Behind this hill, the South Hill of Kantow, a table-land emerged on the right-hand side, and below it, also to the right, the land flattened out into a narrow strip of beach and land which came out into a point, then seemed to curve again, and finally lost itself in an outstretching headland miles away.

Away to the left of the South Hill the river twisted and wound itself off in the distance nearly as broad as ever, in between

two lofty cliffs, densely wooded. Through them one caught ever-changing views of range behind range of mountains of no mean height, now blue with mist, now a darker grey, now with a white cloud wrapped half round them, like a lady's scarf, and now shining out distinctly. For an artistic soul this view, seen through waving banians, with a foreground of bright red hybiscus flowers and white Annunciation lilies, would have been rapture. But the main interest to Isabel centred round the *Taiwan* lying off the buoy, and to her mind the place was woefully lacking in life. She went down from the verandah into the garden and searched about for human habitations.

Yes, there was life in Kantow after all. Rather behind the Consulate, to the right as she faced it, a steep and roughly-made road led up to some four or five white bungalows, all of the same make, and evidently foreign habitations. Farther up the hill, indeed, she could just make out a large red brick house, with long verandahs, closed venetians, and a general air of superiority which was scarcely equalled by the Consulate. It faced due south, and behind it, sloping gradually up to a grassy down, rose a coppice of trees, so disposed as to shut off the back view. This, as Isabel saw, was not so delightful as the front. Behind the foreign houses gently undulated and gradually rose a series of downs. These might formerly have been capital places for riding or shooting, but they were now literally swarming with Chinese soldiers, who were busily engaged in throwing up prodigious piles and banks of red earth, or in making believe that they were doing so. Farther off, shutting off the view inland, rose a chain of hills still higher than the South Mountain, the highest point even rising to some two thousand three hundred feet. And over this North Hill of Kantow a rain-cloud was hanging, and from some distant bamboo grove came the moan of rising wind, ringing and dying away in Isabel's ears like the sound of distant church bells.

It was plainly to the right-hand side of her, to those white bungalows and that red brick house, that Isabel must look for all the amusement she hoped to get out of Kantow. For the worthy young lady had not at all come to the place with the idea of burying herself alive, or retiring from the fight and fun of life in any sentimental or heart-broken manner. She was only going to enjoy life as she never had had the chance of enjoying it before—as she pleased, under no obligations to anyone, free to indulge her likings or antipathies, at liberty to show she liked this one and hated that one. Poor Mr. Reynolds would indeed have been aghast had he had any idea of the programme mapped out in his wife's mind. Of course it was an impossible life, and contained within itself most of the elements of failure with none of the chances of success. But Isabel would have smiled sceptically had anyone, even an angel from heaven, told her this. And so she turned her head towards the other side of the house.

And now she wondered how she had ever kept her eyes so persistently turned the wrong way. For there towered up, a little back from the dwelling-house, and yet completely sheltering it from the north-west, the only piece of antiquity in all Kantow. It was a wonderful square old red fort, massive and strong as on the day it was first built by the old Dutch traders, whose power and almost name has now vanished, but who were formerly lords and masters of all the coast-line of Formosa. That was before the day of Koxinga and his pirate crew, who won the island, or rather the fringe of it, for the Chinese, but left this grand old fort, with its solid masonry and everlasting walls, a wonder and admiration for centuries later. And now Isabel stood and marvelled in her ignorant way at it: how among the light and flimsy and cardboard looking foreign houses, and the mud huts and wooden hovels of the Chinese, this strange old fort had got spirited into its place, and if

it was hers too, like the bungalow, and a further evidence of her position as first in the place.

It grated on her, unsentimental and matter-of-fact though she was, when Mr. Reynolds came out of the house and began to act the guide book. It didn't signify in the least to her that the walls of the fort were thirteen feet thick, nor that these trees had been planted by this Consul, that pit filled up by that one. But, after all, this feeling was but a passing one, and her husband could tell her exactly who lived in each house, even up to the big red one, whose venetians were now opening to admit of a procession of Chinese servants bearing winter garments of various descriptions, which were carefully deposited on the ground to be sunned and aired.

"That is the Commissioner's house. Mrs. Drury, the lady who so kindly came off to see you yesterday."

"Kindly!" retorted Isabel with a shake of her skirts. "You mean she came to stare at me, and see what kind of a wild beast I was. A most insufferable woman. I can't abide her."

"For goodness' sake, Isabel," whispered Mr. Reynolds, looking round anxiously to see that no one could have been within hearing, "please don't speak so loud. And don't be prejudiced. Mrs. Drury is a most kind, a most popular lady. I do hope you will be friends with her."

"I have no intentions of being friends with her," Isabel answered in exactly the same tone of voice as before. "I know by instinct that she hates me, and I also know that I hate her. No, I have no reason, I can only feel. But my mind is quite settled about the matter. Don't bring us together, that is all."

Isabel felt quite theatrical in saying this, and was even a little disappointed at the unfavourable impression her words seemed to make on Mr. Reynolds. His face turned a dull sort of yellow, his eyes seemed to lose the little colour they naturally possessed, and his form dwindled at least two inches in height. In fact, he looked

what he felt—utterly prostrated by this terrible announcement. But having been married only a short time, and therefore being profoundly ignorant of the method of keeping his wife in order, he unwisely ventured on expostulation :

“ But, my dear, you can’t take a sudden dislike to a lady like Mrs. Drury, in a place like Kantow. You will get yourself and me into endless trouble. It can’t be done, it can’t be done ! ”

“ But it *is* done ! ” cried Isabel in a still louder voice, wheeling round suddenly and snapping her fingers close to Mr. Reynolds’ astonished face. “ I don’t care *that* for her ! Nor for anyone else I don’t want to care about ! ” And she triumphantly retired from the fight into the house, leaving Mr. Reynolds certainly master of the field, though scarcely of the situation.

“ Ah me, ah me, ” he groaned inwardly, as he walked towards his office in the old Red Fort, “ how was I ever so mad as to marry ? And how can I convince a woman who has already made up her mind ? Oh dear, oh dear, what will be the end of these two women ! ”

From which it will appear that Mr. Reynolds was no true philosopher. Happily for his balance of mind, he found there was plenty of work to do in the office that morning, and difficult work as well. Then in the evening he took Mr. Vernon on board the *Taiwan*, and saw him off, and thus put a distance of time between himself and Isabel’s announcement of that morning. And to a man who is weak in moral courage delay is infinitely preferable, even with all its attendant horrors of uncertainty, to facing a difficulty boldly.

CHAPTER V.

Cast about as best she could for information, Mrs. Drury was no nearer finding out what had been Mrs. Reynolds' antecedents at the end of ten days than she had been on that memorable day when her curiosity, ill-placed as she now admitted it to have been, had taken her on board the *Taiwan*.

Indeed, she seemed farther than even from solving the mystery. Tom Alison was gone, but not before he had strongly impressed on Angus Murray the necessity of keeping dark all he knew about the fair Isabel. Angus, with all his faults and self-conceit, was a gentleman, and had steadily refused to be drawn by Mrs. Drury, or even his *taipan's* wife, on the subject. It might have been more difficult for him to keep his counsel had he been left for a length of time in Kantow, but unluckily for Mrs. Drury's chances, Mr. De Lacy Smith sent him to taste tea at Banca, some twelve miles up the Kantow river. And as his companions there were mostly Chinese compradores, three or four Parsees, opium merchants, and Portuguese clerks, the temptation to talk was not overwhelmingly great. Meanwhile, Isabel Reynolds was far from dull. The Duc de Borny had established himself as her cavalier, and the nervous discomfort of the Consul at his presence in the house every day since their arrival served as the kind of zest Isabel required to her excitement. Mr. Reynolds had a trick of

bustling into the drawing-room where de Borny sat smoking his cigarette after tea, looking aimlessly and hopelessly about the room as though for some missing yet unexistent article, and then hurrying out again. This would be repeated about every ten minutes. Isabel would giggle, and de Borny—well, it would be difficult to give a name to the expression on his countenance. And yet Isabel had really no need of this supervision on the part of her husband; only she was trying to enjoy herself in her own particular fashion.

Five days after her arrival, Mrs. De Lacy Smith and Mrs. Clay both called at the Consulate. Mr. Reynolds was away at Banca, visiting some Chinese mandarins, and Isabel had consequently been very dull all day. So she received her visitors almost with open arms, and was so very cordial, if not winning, in her manner that Mrs. De Lacy Smith's heart was quite captivated. The ladies paid their call before four o'clock in the afternoon, so the gallant Duke was not on guard, he being kept till that hour adding up or subtracting figures, or mending riding whips, or any other such profitable occupation, in the Custom House. Mrs. Smith began to feel a little indignant with Mrs. Drury for having so maligned the pretty Mrs. Reynolds, by the time she rose to say good-by.

"You must come and see me, my dear," she said in her kind, motherly way. "This is a dull place in summer, and we must try and get up some amusement for you." Isabel enthusiastically threw her arms round the stout lady's neck and kissed her. This action entirely finished Mrs. Smith, and she walked out of the house determined to stand by this maligned beauty through thick and thin.

Nor did her resolution falter even when Mrs. Clay, who had not been quite so enchanted, pointed out the magnificent de Borny, in his favourite checks and tiny straw hat perched over one ear,

deliberately making his way up the hill with a strong tendency towards the Consulate. So, in a frame of mind utterly and beautifully happy (for Mrs. De Lacy Smith had felt very uncomfortable these five days as regarded the future morality of Kantow), she arrived at the big red house, and proceeded to the Herculean task of overthrowing Mrs. Drury's prejudices.

Mrs. Clay, who felt the guiltiness of one who has been bowing herself in the house of Rimmon, took refuge with the Commissioner, who was drinking tea and swallowing cake at an express rate. Of all women who bored him, perhaps Mrs. Clay was the greatest bore, with her endless tales of children and amahs, and her uncomfortable manner of suddenly appealing for an opinion on some subject, when her unhappy victim had been listening to a conversation which was going on at a little distance. So the Commissioner sat watching an opportunity to bolt, when, to his great surprise, the flow of Mrs. Clay's talk suddenly ceased, and he found out that she was actually listening to what Mrs. Drury and Mrs. De Lacy Smith were saying.

The conversation was certainly becoming somewhat animated. Mrs. Smith, who had come armed for the fight, had evidently taken Mrs. Drury by surprise. The position was, indeed, being gradually won inch by inch, since Mrs. Drury had admitted that Isabel was pretty, and that, as nothing was definitely known against her, the probabilities were that there was nothing to know. This last was not got without much hard fighting, but just as the Commissioner had begun to hope danger in that quarter was over, Mrs. Clay put in :

"What do you think of the way she goes on with the Duc de Borny? Do you think that right, Mrs. Smith?"

Both the combatants turned round suddenly and looked at Mrs. Clay—Mrs. Drury triumphantly, Mrs. Smith with an expression of vexation. It was a difficult nut for Mrs. Smith to crack, but she made a laudable attempt at it.

"She has been only here five days," she said. "You can't judge of a person by five days."

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Smith, that is precisely what you can do," said Mrs. Drury, with an approving nod at Mrs. Clay. "When I see a person's present conduct to be—immodest, to say the least, I can pretty well draw an inference as to what her past life has been. Why, there is Angus Murray, who came out on the same steamer. He won't say a word about her, though we all know how fond he is of the ladies. If he had had anything good to say about her, you may be sure he would have said it long ago."

"Not necessarily," answered Mrs. Smith, who really felt herself completely driven into a corner. "They say one ought always to go for a woman's character to a woman. Men are not always so much more charitable than women, are they, Mr. Drury?"

Thus challenged, Oliver saw a good opportunity for quitting the field with glory.

"If I were a woman, I should have no hesitation in coming to all three of you for my character," he said oracularly. "Personally, I don't think the question worth discussing." And opening the door he disappeared.

"Dear Mr. Drury looks at no other lady but yourself," said Mrs. Clay, rising and taking hold of Mrs. Drury's hand. "I don't believe he even knows how often the Duc de Borny has been at the Consulate; he is there most probably now. And Mr. Reynolds away at Banca, too."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Smith almost rudely. "Good-night, my dear. I think, in your position, I would soon go and call at the Consulate."

But though Mrs. Drury wisely shook her head at the suggestion, and her mind was unalterably made up to ignore the Consul's wife when she escorted her visitors to the door, a little consideration induced her to alter this resolution. And

so, somewhat to gratify that curiosity which had formerly got her into trouble, and partly to perform the function she had for so long exercised as District Superintendent of Morals and Proprieties, Mrs. Drury took out her best crimson satin parasol covered with black lace, and put on a marvellous pair of kid gloves that served for all the state occasions at Kantow, and slowly walked down the rough, coral-macadamised road, past the white bungalows, down a small slope, and then up another one, till she reached the great brown gate that led into the Consulate.

But there she found she had come too late for reconnoitring. For just as she had reached the steps that led up from the garden into the verandah, she saw the great mushroom-shaped sun-hat of the Consul emerging from a winding path which led up the steep incline below the house. He was not more than three minutes' distance from her, so she felt herself bound to wait for his escort, though a trifle vexed that he had not been half-an-hour earlier or later in coming home.

"There comes the Consul," sounded through an open window above her head, though somewhat to the left, and therefore quite out of her range of seeing or of being seen. "Shall I go now?"

"No, why should you?" came back in the bride's voice; and then Mr. Reynolds walked round a great hybiscus bush and nearly fell into Mrs. Drury's arms.

"Mrs. Drury! Well, I do think it is particularly kind of you to come and call," he said quickly and nervously. "I am sure Mrs. Reynolds will be delighted to see you. Isabel!"

Isabel answered by coming out into the verandah. Her face fell a little upon perceiving her visitor, but whether she felt she could afford to be gracious in her own domain, or whether she had really taken to heart Mr. Reynolds' words, or, lastly, whether she was really in too good a temper to be put out by anyone, at any rate she was certainly civil in her greeting to Mrs. Drury. The

two ladies walked into the drawing-room where de Borny was, of course, engaged in studying a photographic album with the deepest interest, while Mr. Reynolds disappeared to arrange his toilet, which had suffered considerably during a long hot day of official calls.

It was a vast pity that he was a man who did not take long in arranging his attire. For when he came back into the drawing-room, Mrs. Drury and Mrs. Reynolds, though not on easy terms, were yet quite friendly disposed towards each other. De Borny, too, was leaning forward and taking a not too prominent share in the conversation. The entrance of the Consul spoilt all this. Isabel, more out of pure bravado to him than actual dislike of Mrs. Drury, turned half round and began to devote herself exclusively to the Frenchman. Mr. Reynolds sprang into the breach, and to cover, as he imagined, his wife's retreat, began to overwhelm Mrs. Drury with small talk, at the same time trying every now and then, by frantic appeals to Isabel, to draw her into the conversation. The poor Duc looked horribly uncomfortable, and the voices ceased, as was natural, all at one and the same moment. Mr. Reynolds tried to talk again, but as he was also endeavouring to keep an eye on Isabel, who had gone off to the piano, taking de Borny with her, his conversation got more at random than ever. The situation became, in fact, very unpleasant for everyone except Mrs. Reynolds, and yet the Consul felt miserable when he saw Mrs. Drury rise to take her leave.

Isabel, too, now experienced a qualm of repentance, an uncomfortable feeling that she had put everyone out, and done herself no good. Perhaps she felt this the more by having time to think over it, for, to her utter astonishment, de Borny begged to be allowed to see Mrs. Drury home, and that lady, after a due amount of pressing, accepted the offer. In truth, de Borny, who was pre-eminently a man of the world, had no intention of being written off the Commissioner's wife's books because Mrs. Reynolds

chose to be rude to her. Isabel might be pretty, and amusing, and good fun, but she had not a notion of how to keep a table, or provide food worthy for the gods from the wretched market of Kantow. But Mrs. Drury—her fame as a housekeeper was acknowledged everywhere within the Middle Kingdom, and Mr. Drury was unrivalled in his knowledge of wines. And of course de Borny was greedy, not coarsely so, but greedy to such an extent that he would infinitely prefer a good dinner to a pretty companion. And he saw very little chance of getting good dinners in Kantow outside the great red house on the hill.

Not that these sordid ideas came distinctly before his mind's eye. Naturally, one ought to be friendly with the Commissioner's wife when one is a junior assistant, and so very much of the pleasantness of one's life depends upon that great functionary. Besides, de Borny had no personal grounds for quarrelling with Mrs. Drury, who was always, in fact, a great favourite with young men. Why should he meddle in Mrs. Reynolds' quarrel? So it was rather a lucky chance for him, this, of escorting the lady home from the Consulate.

It was rather a salutary lesson for Isabel, too, this desertion in what she regarded as the moment of her triumph by her cavalier. Not that she would have admitted it, even to herself, for the world, and Mr. Reynolds came as near spoiling it as he could by reading her a lecture on the impropriety of her behaviour towards Mrs. Drury. These lectures invariably had the wrong effect upon Isabel, but the day which de Borny allowed to elapse before his next visit was almost magical in its consequence. For, three days later, also before four o'clock, Isabel donned one of her quietest dresses, brushed her curly head into a shape somewhat resembling that of a civilised being's, put on a bonnet which gave her a curiously Puritanical air, and paid a visit to Mrs. Drury, who was "not at home" for this visitor at any rate.

With the self-satisfied feeling of one who has done a good deed and received a well-earned reward therefor, Mrs. Reynolds walked on to Mrs. Clay's house. That lady was in a perpetual state of being at home, and so Isabel was admitted. She allowed herself to be touched and fingered by the Clay children to an unlimited extent, but in spite of this made no farther progress in the good graces of their mother. For why? Mrs. Drury's mandate had gone forth, two days before, that she who was friends with the Consul's wife could not be friends with her. And Mrs. Clay's decision between the two potentates had been arrived at almost in a moment of time.

So she refused Isabel's invitation to the children to come and spend the day with her, on the score of their still having whooping-cough, and tried to be stiff with her visitor, of course with very little effect. For had she not on the old grey shawl, in spite of the warmth of the day, and was she not sitting on a lower chair than Isabel, and at least three inches shorter than her when she stood up? And how can anyone be dignified under such trying circumstances?

Mrs. De Lacy Smith, to whom Isabel went last of all, was not quite so affectionate as she had been at the Consulate, though from quite another cause. Mrs. Drury and her dignity did not concern her in the least, and she would never have felt coldly towards Isabel Reynolds on that account. But Mrs. Smith was not only a very estimable lady, but she was highly and deeply, too, religious, for religion's sake as well as for the "look-see" of it. Now the very last day had been Sunday, the first Sunday since Mrs. Reynolds' arrival at Kantow. The Consul had always been a very regular attendant at the services in the little Mission Chapel, not because he was a religious man, but because he considered that it behoved a respectable Briton to be a pillar of the Church as well as of the State. So the Consulate pew was in a lofty and dignified position, with cushions covered with Chinese

silk, and an indefinite number of hassocks. These were there mostly by reason of uselessness, for of course Mr. Reynolds was too stiff, or too magnificent a personage, to kneel for the prayers. But he sang the hymns and canticles in a most extraordinary woman-like treble, and could find his places as easily as the officiating Missionary himself. Then he listened to the sermons, and always took notes of them. Taking notes was indeed a perfect passion with him. But the parson liked to see it, and Mr. De Lacy Smith looked on the ceremony as a personal compliment to himself, since it was that worthy merchant who always elected the Chaplain.

"Of course Mrs. Reynolds will go to church on Sunday," thought Mrs. De Lacy Smith on the morning of that day, as she prepared to go thither herself. The menkind of Kantow were a profane lot, as men are apt to be who have been hard at work all the week and like a ten o'clock breakfast on Sunday. In ancient days the profanity had even been known to reach the height of large Sunday picnics. Now, for the last four years and more, that is, since Mr. and Mrs. De Lacy Smith had taken up the chapel, these things had to be done secretly and in a corner. The ladies of Kantow went regularly to church, if only to give their silk dresses an airing. Great was the smell of camphor on Sundays in autumn, fearful the fluttering of fans in summer. Yet they went, even up to Mrs. Drury, who was whispered to be unorthodox. The doctor, a voluble Irishman, went also. The Consul went. The Missionaries went in a body. Mr. Drury, alas, could not be persuaded to darken the chapel doors. At first he had feigned a weekly fever, but finding this excuse inconvenient, he had thrown off the mask, and declared himself in favour of Sunday excursions, shooting-parties, balls, dances—anything but sitting in a small, hot and stuffy room, singing nonsense that was neither poetry nor prose. And so it came about that his shots, and those of the assistants in the

Customs, were frequently the only sounds from the outside world which grated on the ears of the devout church-goers in Kantow.

But now, as Mrs. De Lacy Smith got into church five minutes before the tinkling bell had ceased, she began to feel a trifle nervous as to whether Mrs. Reynolds would come. The Consulate pew was empty as yet, but then so were many other ones. Ah! there was a lady's step on the coralled path outside. Only Mrs. Clay. Another, and another: the Missionaries. Now came in Mrs. Drury, who stopped to whisper something to Mrs. Clay, smiled triumphantly towards Mrs. Smith, and sailed up to her pew. And now the harmonium began to squeak forth the *Stabat Mater* which invariably opened the proceedings—for the Chaplain's wife was limited in her repertory of voluntaries, and confined her attention to marvellous new chants and hymn tunes.

The Chaplain came into church at least two minutes late. He had been peeping round the vestry door to see if the Consul had not yet arrived, but finally made up his mind to come out and wait no longer. Mrs. Smith's heart was fluttering most unaccountably, and she could scarcely rise for the Exhortation. For the good lady had taken it most seriously to mind that the young bride was a good girl maligned by evil-tongued Mrs. Drury, and the whole position would have been secured beyond a doubt if she had only come to church that morning.

No, it was only the Consul, no one with him, who hurried into church during the Confession, and who, conscious of very creaking boots, stole on tip-toe up to his place. The poor man was out of breath, very hot and very red. His mind was also evidently much disturbed, for he stood up instead of bending down his back, and grasped a hymn book instead of a prayer book. Mrs. Smith saw all these signs with a grief slowly turning into anger against the absent Isabel, an anger which was increased

by the magnanimous behaviour of Mrs. Drury after service was over.

"Mrs. Reynolds must be ill," said that excellent lady to Mrs. Smith, as they met at the church door. "We had better enquire after her from Mr. Reynolds."

The unfortunate Consul at the moment appeared, hat in hand, and notes sticking out from his prayer book.

"I hope Mrs. Reynolds is not ill?" questioned Mrs. Clay, opening what seemed to be guileless eyes. "We were afraid she might have a touch of fever."

"Not at all, not at all," said the Consul quickly. "That is, I mean she is a little tired. Pretty well, thank you." And he looked at his old ally, Mrs. Drury, for the help he had always been accustomed to get in difficult situations.

But that lady's face was inscrutable, and Mrs. De Lacy Smith's rather redder than usual, though whether from the heat of the church, the eloquence of the Missionaries, or anger, it would have been difficult to say. But Mrs. Clay went on: "Will Mrs. Reynolds be well enough to come to church this afternoon? I hope so."

"I don't know," Mr. Reynolds answered, hailing with joy the path that took him back to his own house and away from these worthy ladies. He knew, indeed, all too well.

For Isabel Reynolds was not only an ex-actress, but, he had fully realised that morning for the first time, next door to a heathen as well.

No, she would not hear of going to church. What, go and sit still for an hour and a half, getting the fidgets, a headache, wasting her time, all because the other women of the place did so? It was too ridiculous to be thought of. Besides which, she would not know how to behave in church. She had not been in one for at least ten years.

She ought to go? Why ought? She wouldn't, that was the long and short of it. And so Mr. Reynolds had been made late for church, and gone very near perjuring his conscience by falsehood after church, all because a naughty girl, whose character was hanging by a single thread in Kantow, chose to go her own way and take no heed of the consequences.

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Smith's doubts as to Mrs. Reynolds' health were set at rest that afternoon. For all through service, to her scandal and Mr. Reynolds' horror, two voices, breaking out often into peals of laughter, kept floating in through the open doorway. Now next door to the church, and only separated from it by a hedge of oleander and cactuses, was the lawn tennis court belonging to the Customs. And the voices of the two who were playing there were those of the Duc de Borny, who was known to be an infidel of the Bradlaugh type, and the Consul's wife.

Therefore, when Isabel Reynolds called on Mrs. De Lacy Smith next day, Monday, the kind elderly lady had gone through various stages of expectation, interest, alarm, surprise, grief and indignation, until the Consul's wife had begun to appear not quite such a lily as she had tried to imagine. If Mrs. Drury had triumphed openly over Isabel's failure in right-doing, Mrs. Smith might have felt she was bound still to champion the wanderer. But Mrs. Drury had been too wary to do so. And the way in which Mr. Reynolds had gone from one lady to the other after afternoon church, trying, as Mr. Smith had remarked, to make everyone say that his own particular black sheep was a white one, had added still more to the unfavourable impression which Isabel's conduct had already made upon her.

"And after all, my dear Rosalie," remarked her husband, as Mrs. Smith leaned somewhat ponderously on his arm, whenever the road was wide enough to admit of the two portly persons walking side by side, "she must have been a trifle curious, you know, to have married such a man as Reynolds."

And Mrs. De Lacy Smith could not contradict him.

Isabel Reynolds was perfectly mystified at Mrs. Smith's dignity. She had expected to be received with open arms, and lo! she was kept waiting full ten minutes before Mrs. Smith came into the drawing-room, and then her finger-tips were scarcely touched in greeting. It was quite evident that Mrs. Smith had taken offence about something, though this particular something was the very last that would have suggested itself to Isabel. The girl felt really sorry, however, for, self-willed and lawless though she was by nature, she had a warm heart, which had been given entirely to the excellent stout lady since that afternoon at the Consulate. Somehow or other Isabel felt now that she would be the better for having a friend among these women, some one of them who would take an interest in her, who would—why hide the truth?—make life more amusing for her than de Borny could do and for longer periods of time. Mr. Reynolds was a man devoured by an overwhelming sense of duty. He was miserable unless he was sitting in his office inside the old Red Fort, making his notes and reports, and bothering his Chinese writer and his interpreter. Even when he had absolutely nothing to do, he went and sat there all through office hours, from ten till four. And as this was what he was paid to do, Isabel could not find any fault with him.

Not that she wanted him particularly at home. The Consul would have made his fortune, or would have been killed, long before, if only he had chosen the profession most suitable for him. He was a born spy. Isabel knew that all her little secret peccadilloes, all her uncontrolled thoughts and ideas, all her

actions, innocent or dubious, were continually being watched, perhaps noted down on some of those dreadful little slips of paper he was always loaded with and which he seemed always trying to conceal. And she had thought how good it would be to get away to friendly eyes, such as Mrs. Smith's, where no one would suspect her of any but innocent designs, and where she could be good almost without any effort.

Were those dreams to end in nothing, then? It seemed like it to Isabel for the first quarter of an hour she sat in Mrs. Smith's drawing-room. But whether it was the Puritan bonnet, or a wild idea of proselytising that overcame her, certain it is that after that quarter of an hour the good lady's kind heart melted, and she began to treat her visitor on something like equal terms.

On these two, gradually coming together again, Mrs. Drury broke in like a stream of icy water. Mrs. Smith felt herself obliged to withdraw into her shell, Isabel felt awkward and therefore, naturally, angry. And yet Mrs. Drury's behaviour was angelic beyond what even her best friends could have expected from her.

"I am sorry to have missed you this afternoon," she said, settling herself with the familiar air of one who is a constant visitor at the house. And she went on: "You had a headache yesterday? I was sorry to hear that; you ought to feel so well just coming out from home."

"So I do," answered Isabel innocently. "Don't think I ever had a headache in my life. Certainly I had none yesterday. Why, I was playing tennis with the Duke."

Even after this speech Isabel was at a loss to understand why Mrs. De Lacy Smith had relapsed into her former coldness when she took leave of her, which of course she did shortly. But the Duc de Borny, who came to dinner that evening, made it all plain in the verandah afterwards.

"You are too pretty for them, Mrs. Reynolds, and they are all jealous of you."

And of course Isabel answered :

"Stuff and nonsense! You know I hate French compliments."

Whereupon the window curtain behind them nearly twitched itself off its hooks, and the Consul came out to say it was too damp to risk the night air any longer.

April passed, and May came, and Angus Murray was still up at Banca, and Isabel Reynolds still a mystery.

Oliver Drury never mentioned her name to his wife. He had judged rightly that Mrs. Drury's mind was unalterably made up on that subject. As unalterably, it must be said, as it is possible for a woman's to be in regard to a subject that is never discussed. Had Mr. Drury actually wished the two ladies to be friends, he could not have gone to work in a more cunning fashion than leaving the question entirely in his wife's hands.

But he was most profoundly indifferent to Isabel. Occasionally he paid a visit to the Consul in his office, but he never accompanied him home. And then there were other and much more importantly pressing affairs to be considered.

The great earth-works which, scamp them as best they might, kept on growing day by day on the heights above and around Kantow, were not all show and folly on the part of the Chinese. They meant preparations for a near and deadly foe. The soldiers who were being so constantly landed, who prowled round about the Consulate, impudently strolled through its grounds and looked in at its windows, were not for fighting and exterminating the savages of the interior only. They were being trained and drilled by foreigners, too, to fight against a Western foe. And the community of Kantow, though it scoffed at all these preparations and jeered at the forts and great foreign guns and torpedoes and wires which were lying about with such regardlessness of expense, was to wake

up one morning and find the Chinese had been right, and that it would now be their turn, as the winners, to laugh.

But neither Mr. Drury nor Mr. Reynolds laughed even now. Mr. Drury was too much in the secrets of the local Chinese authorities not to be wiser than his generation, and Mr. Reynolds feared from habit more than from anything else. He had been crying "Wolf!" to the Minister at Peking ever since he had come to Kantow, long before the days of the earth-works, and the big guns, and the torpedo-wires. They had listened to him at first, then they had taken to laughing at him. And now all the reports, valuable as they were, that he sent up to the Minister, were carefully pigeon-holed, to be read at leisure.

Up from the South of China, from Tongking and Annam, floated at different intervals, even across the Formosa Channel, to the island of Taiwan and to Kantow, the news of what the French were doing, had done, or were about to do. Now it was a hundred Frenchmen who had attacked and captured some strong position, killing and wounding to the number of ten thousand odd. Again, a week later, it was the hundred Frenchmen who had been cut down to a man by the Black Flags, or some such horde. And all this while, though France was trying to hammer China, and China was trying what effect time and climate would have on the Western barbarian, the two nations were not at war with each other. This may seem passing strange to an unprejudiced outsider, but was most natural and dignified on the part of the Heathen Chinese. He is, indeed, the most sublime philosopher, not to say the most able diplomatist, on the face of the globe. So though the French were fighting, China was passive: only, its fleet of foreign-built ironclads, gunboats and torpedo-boats moved down south, its great arsenals at Foochow and Shanghai were busy in making ready all preparations for war, and the beautiful island of Taiwan was guarded by countless troops and fortified, especially in the

north, with earth-works in the most approved modern style and fitted up with great Western guns.

In May, the reports of fighting, though still at a great distance, began to get more serious. The Consul's notes on the subject filled more than one drawer, his notifications to the British subjects in his district began to pour forth in a steady stream. But, like the foolish inhabitants of the ancient world at the time of the Deluge, the merchants paid no heed to the voice of their Noah. They ate, drank, bought tea, haggled over prices, shipped it away as they had always done. They did not like the presence of so many Chinese soldiers round about the settlement, and why? It made prices higher, food scarcer, and walks and excursions less pleasant. As for the earth-works, they were so many standing examples of the gigantic folly of the Chinese. Admit even that the French should come to the island, what would happen then? The Chinese soldiers would run away, leaving their guns unfired, and the French would open up the trade of Taiwan, making their fortunes in a few months instead of in many years.

Such was the common talk at the Kanton Club. When Mr. Reynolds came in, the young men talked even more at random, mostly for the fun of hearing the Consul try to retort. They could silence him and cover him with ridicule for the time being, but he always came back to the same place. And every day, before breakfast, he walked along his garden path to the farthest corner of the Red Fort, and from thence scanned the horizon with his old dim and worn-out telescope, to catch the first glimpse of the French fleet coming to take the island.

And Mr. Drury kept his counsel as long as he was in the Custom House below the hill; but he noted all the ammunition and implements of war that the Chinese cruisers were bringing in, and knew that their days of quiet and safety were numbered. Then he walked up to the Red Fort, waded through Mr. Reynolds' drawer of notes, filled up a few gaps in his own observations,

and sent off reports to his chief at Peking which were not pigeon-holed.

All this time the month was creeping slowly on, and Kantow was busy with its tea-maket. Steamers came in almost every third day, Mrs. Drury's larder groaned with Amoy beef, vegetables and fruit. The ladies of the place had suddenly thrown off their winter attire, and blossomed forth in pink and blue cottons, flannel tennis-dresses, washing-silks, old and new. Mrs. Drury looked quite six years younger as she ran about on the tennis-ground, where she was altogether without match among the ladies. Mrs. Smith, indeed, had nearly given up the game, her stoutness being such as to prevent her enjoying it, and Mrs. Clay was too often kept at home by sick or naughty children to be anything but a decidedly mediocre player. And Isabel—she had never touched a tennis bat before she came out to Kantow. Too lazy to practise the stroke, too vain to bear being anything but the best among them, she gradually deserted the ground, and when Mr. Reynolds, after a fierce contest with some mighty champion, turned to look for her, she would have disappeared. And when he had spent some three quarters of an hour in rushing about madly searching for her, de Borny or some other long-sighted person would point out a speck on the beach long below the Red Fort, and far away to the right, say a good couple of miles, as Mrs. Reynolds. Another hour, and he would find her in the group on the tennis-ground which had collected for parting words at sundown. It was of no use scolding her, for she always said: "I like exploring, and I like going by myself. There are no soldiers down on the beach, and if there were I should not be afraid of them. Let me enjoy myself in my own fashion."

Mr. Reynolds, though he felt it was very wrong, always gave in. For why? De Borny's patent leather shoes and spotless spats would never have condescended to a rough and solitary beach. Besides which, Isabel would soon get tired of going.

And at any rate he was delivered from watching her so long as he knew she was really by herself.

As for the Duc de Borny, he had always too many irons in the fire to be able to devote his attention exclusively to one. Of course the first person in the universe to him was Isidore, Duc de Borny, and this first person must always be set in a suitable frame. Now, to put on elegantly eccentric clothes, which fit beautifully so long as the ground walked on is fairly even, but which may not be imperilled by fording streams, jumping rocks or walking in sand, means a considerable expenditure of time and energy. De Borny did not get out of the Custom House till 4 p.m. Tennis began at 4.45. Is it to be expected of a *masher* who dresses better than anyone else in the place, and who, moreover, detests walking and possesses nothing but very much pointed and glazed shoes, that he will, for the sake of a very compromising young lady, toil some three or four miles in a pretty hot sun, burning his complexion and ruining his clothes?

So de Borny became more and more devoted to Mrs. Drury, who, to tell the truth, was far more amusing to him than Isabel herself. For Mrs. Drury was a woman of considerable wit and culture, whereas Isabel's good points, dancing and acting, she might not dare to make use of.

CHAPTER VII.

The birthday of Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria fell, as everyone knows, on the 24th of May. This day had always been made a great festival at Kantow, partly because everyone in the community was an enthusiastic Conservative, partly because it came at a time when the heat of summer was not too great to put a veto on merry-makings, partly because just then none of the tea-tasters at Banca were too busy to spare the time to take a trip down the river and join with the good folks of Kantow. As representative of the Queen, the Consul from time immemorial had given the feast. This generally consisted of a huge dinner-party, to which all the upper ten of the community were invited. And the upper ten consisted of all the indoor staff of the Customs, wives included, the doctor and the seven or eight merchants of the place, together with the captain of any steamer that happened to be in port. The missionaries invariably excluded themselves from these worldly proceedings, and the outdoor staff of the Customs was not considered to be in society.

As usual, the invitations for a dinner at the Consulate to celebrate the Queen's birthday were circulated some four days before the appointed time. The only difference to be perceived in the notes, even down to the wording thereof, was to be found in the signature. It was, naturally, that of the lady of the house.

And yet it was exactly this change which gave Mrs. Drury half an hour's serious consideration on the morning when she received her chit. Mr. Drury was, of course, away at the office, and this weighty decision lay entirely in her own hands. There before her was the chit, there the chit-book which the coolie must take back, either with an answering note or with her initials against her name as token that the letter had come into the right hands. Mrs. Drury's dignity said: Do not go. You have taken up a position in the place as regards Mr. Reynolds' wife, and you must keep it up. The other people will find the party fall very flat without you, and Mr. Reynolds will be so miserable that he will make his wife come and apologise. Then all Kanton will be at your feet again.

Fired with this dignity, Mrs. Drury sat down and composed a masterpiece in the third person, declining the invitation. But just at the moment of putting it into the envelope, a big blot fell on the paper; and who ever saw dignity combined with blots? But it was an impossibility to Mrs. Drury's quick mind to sit down and copy the letter all over again. Moreover, as she was a trifle superstitious, she took this as an omen that her epistle wanted a little more consideration. So, summoning the boy, she gave him back the chit-book initialled, and determined to wait for Mr. Drury's return before finally answering the invitation.

But although she employed quite half an hour in visiting various dens of iniquity in the house, such as pantries, dressing-rooms, verandahs, etc., and giving well-deserved scoldings as to the state they were in to two profoundly indifferent coolies, yet the morning seemed interminably long to Mrs. Drury, to whom indecision was as nightmare. All the time she was expending torrents of wrath on the coolies her mind was occupied with Isabel Reynolds, which may perhaps have accounted for the extra venom she put into her scoldings. If, indeed,

only Oliver Drury looked at things in their right light! There was absolutely no one in the place who had any sense of propriety. But again, as Mrs. Smith always urged, where had she any proofs of Isabel's past life? This was always the crushing weight that silenced Mrs. Drury. No, of proofs there were none as yet, but it was always possible that some might be forthcoming. And where can proofs be got at, apart from a person's surroundings?

Actually, Mrs. Drury found herself thinking she ought to observe the Consulate more closely. If she wanted to damn the Reynolds family absolutely, she must get a little more intimate with them, and not treat the lady with the same amount of stiffness—it could never be rudeness in Mrs. Drury—that she had used before. Perhaps, after all, she had better invite them to tiffin, not dinner, because only Mrs. Drury's particular friends were ever invited to that meal. But, unfortunately, they had forestalled her in the invitation. It was a come-down to Mrs. Drury to eat of their food before they had eaten of hers. Yet in this case it was the only course open to her to take. That is, if she ever meant to find out anything about what Isabel had been before she became Mrs. Reynolds.

There was still another consideration, which helped to turn Mrs. Drury's wavering mind. One may be a great lady, a great power in the place, but no one will feel one's absence much from a festivity where there are other equally amusing ladies present. The guests assembled may say during the soup: "Mrs. Drury not here? Sorry;" but they will have only a hazy recollection of one during the fish, and will have totally forgotten one long before the sweets. And one's own self in the meanwhile! That self will be having a very bad dinner, prepared by the No. 2 cook, the head man having gone to help his friend or brother at the Consulate, and a very dull evening afterwards, with a husband fast asleep in an arm-chair, and one's own self in the worst of humours.

How it came about Mrs. Drury herself did not very well know, but she must have taken this last factor very seriously into consideration, for before Mr. Drury came back from the Custom House, about half-past twelve, a chit had been dispatched to the Consulate, in consequence of which the two places of honour on May 24th bore cards marked with the names of Mr. and Mrs. Drury.

It was a most beautifully cool and moonlight night, this of the Queen's Birthday. All day long the patched and mended, though still very impressive, Consular flag had floated from the top of the Red Fort. All day long the Custom House had flown its biggest and ugliest yellow dragon flag. Mr. Reynolds had been a great deal too busy to take a holiday, though all his Chinese clerks had availed themselves of the day, and were burying imaginary grandmothers with reckless profusion. For whenever a Chinaman wants a few days' holiday, he will always have an obliging relative, generally a grandmother, ready to die at a moment's notice, and foreigners may smile or frown, but the "greymother makey die" must come first, and business or work may follow as best they can.

Isabel, too, was very busy, but then her business was to profit, the which could scarcely be said of Mr. Reynolds. The cook was rising to the occasion, but the table, plates, silver and glass all wanted a masterly supervision. But everything was ready in good time, down to Isabel herself, who gave a few finishing touches to Mr. Reynolds which delighted that worthy, and indeed almost made him look a different man. Quite different he would have looked, in truth, if he had only allowed Isabel just to tinge his eyelashes and eyebrows from a certain bottle, remains of her theatrical wardrobe. But he was horrified at the mere thought, and begged Isabel most piteously to wash off any adornments she might have put on her own face. To which the lady very sensibly replied: "I am not quite such a fool as I look, Consul. I wish I could say the same of you!"

With which doubtful compliment she danced out of the dressing-room, to be followed by poor Mr. Reynolds' apologetic voice :

"Please don't be sharp to-night, Isabel. I'll give you a beautiful present if you're good."

"Phew!" was the answer. Isabel was getting beyond presents now. She could buy them for herself if she wanted them.

However, conscious of a becoming dress—pale pink satin, cut very low, short sleeves, and decidedly short skirt, showing two very pretty feet and ankles not small but well-shaped—Isabel was in the best of humours when her guests arrived. The bachelors came first, and they were open in their admiration of her dress and person. Mr. Reynolds felt pleased. Then came Mr. and Mrs. Smith, she in a bright blue silk dress, draped with black lace, cut square at the neck, and revealing an extremely plump neck and shoulders. Then Mr. and Mrs. Olay, the lady in a quiet blacklace dress with a very large white lace fichu completely hiding her neck. These guests all arrived in good time, mindful of the old Kantow custom, which allowed no extra quarters of an hour to cooks, but meant business : half-past seven o'clock dinner requiring attendance at five minutes to that time, eight o'clock attendance at ten minutes to that hour, the last-named being that of great occasions, when the settling of places and order of precedence required it that the master of the house should have five minutes more at his disposal.

The hour was just striking when Mr. and Mrs. Drury were announced. Remarkably well, though it is to be feared slightly worn, looked Mrs. Drury in her dark crimson velvet gown, made very simply, but fitting so exquisitely that it filled all the other feminine minds with envy. Add to this striking costume some most magnificent diamonds, and it will be understood how completely the Commissioner's wife took the shine out of everybody else. De Berny, who arrived just after her, was for one moment

so dazzled that he scarcely perceived his host and hostess. But Mrs. Drury gracefully swept to one side—her dress was long and flowing—and made way for Isabel, who for the first time for many years felt painfully conscious of the shortness of her skirts. De Borny noticed the skirts also, for he found an opportunity to whisper to Isabel in the few minutes that elapsed before dinner was announced :

“There is not everyone who has such pretty feet and ankles to show as you.”

“What do you mean?” Isabel asked aloud, a trifle snappishly, but before a reply could be given a voice sounded on her other side, saying :

“May I have the pleasure of taking you in to dinner, Mrs. Reynolds?”

And, looking up, Isabel's eyes met straight, for the first time since she had come to Kantow, those of Oliver Drury.

The dining-room at the Kantow Consulate was a fine sight that evening. The room, a long and plentifully be-windowed one, was ablaze with lights. Of course Kantow was far beyond the reach of gas, but the oil-lamps were artistic to a degree, and so arranged that, without any glare in the eyes of the guests, the table was nowhere in shadow. The cloth was sprinkled with lilies and hybiscus, common enough flowers to the inhabitants of Taiwan, and therefore generally discarded for papery roses or ragged geraniums. To Isabel the flowers were still new, and therefore beautiful. So she dressed her table liberally with them, and made what even Mrs. Drury was obliged to own was a success.

Rather dull was the end of the table where the Commissioner's wife sat, in the place of honour, on Mr. Reynolds' right hand. The excellent Consul had a most profound dread of not putting people in their right place, and so, though he would much have preferred having Mrs. Smith on his left-hand side, he thought it unquestionably his duty to give that seat to Mrs. Clay, whose

husband was an assistant in the Customs. Now it had always been a sore point with the Smiths, as indeed with all other merchants of Kantow, this giving of chief seats to the people in the Customs, whom they looked upon after all as their inferiors in position, being in the service of the Chinese, and in no wise equal to them, the merchants, in independence or in fortune. So it was with almost a bad grace that Mrs. Smith took a seat half-way down the table, and she was only very slightly mollified by seeing that Mr. Smith was seated on Isabel's left hand.

Mrs. Reynolds' end of the table was lively enough. Next to Mr. Drury sat Angus Murray, down from his banishment for a few days, and making up for previous weeks of silence and business by an unlimited amount of chaff and laughter. No dignity here at all. Mrs. Drury, when she once looked down, during a pause in a most uninteresting conversation with Mr. Reynolds on bi-metallism, actually saw, or imagined she saw, a napkin go flying from Isabel's place in the direction of Angus. This might have been imagination, but a very smart rap with the fan on Mr. Smith's bald pate she could have sworn to afterwards. And how they all seemed to enjoy it! Why, even her husband was waking up and taking part in the fun. But here Mr. Reynolds, by a question three times repeated, managed to distract her attention entirely.

Isabel was, indeed, very happy that dinner time. Angus Murray always brightened her up, and had, moreover, a much better influence over her than de Borny, who was now gnashing his teeth and biting his moustache next to Mrs. Clay. Old Mr. Smith, too, kept on paying her the most absurd of compliments, and as for Mr. Drury—why, he was at any rate infinitely better than his wife. His two kind blue eyes looked on at her fun and tomboyism, if it so pleases you to call it, with amusement, certainly not with disapprobation. More than this, whenever he opened his mouth it was with something comic. For Oliver

Drury was intensely humorous, though it was not everyone who had found this out as yet.

Dinner was very quickly over for the lower end of the table, though it is to be feared Mrs. Drury had found it interminably long. That poor lady was getting more and more perplexed. Draw him as best she might, Mr. Reynolds refused to throw any light on his wife's antecedents, as, indeed, who could have expected him to do, seeing what they had been? And as Mrs. Drury had come to the Consulate for the sole purpose of getting that point settled, it is not to be wondered at that she felt annoyed when the ladies rose from table, and yet her mission was not accomplished.

Out of respect for her lady guests, Isabel did not offer to smoke a cigarette that evening, although many cases were held open to her all round the table. The Consul looked as nearly angry as he could be, but did not say a word. Only those who sat near him noticed that he gave a sigh, undoubtedly of relief, when the door closed upon all these fair daughters of Eve.

And now the talk around the dining-table became more interesting to those unfortunate mortals who had had no partner at the meal. For the Consul went off straight on the war-path, and having been made very solemn by an extra glass or two of port, warned the community in really eloquent language that their Flood was close upon them. A titter began among the younger men, but the elder ones looked a trifle more grave. For the captain of the *Taiwan* was sitting among them, and he had seen some eight or ten French cruisers making sail for some unknown place—men said, the Min River and Foochow—but at any rate nearer the China coast than they had ever been before.

"Tell us more about the danger when it is a little nearer, Consul," sneered a young fellow just out from England. But none of the elder men, nor Angus Murray himself, laughed at the

joke. For Mr. Drury was leaning across the table, and saying something in an undertone to Mr. De Lacy Smith which was making that worthy gentleman feel a trifle uncomfortable.

"I am of Mr. Reynolds' opinion," cried Mr. Smith at length.

"Especially after what you say, Drury. And I propose we furnish ourselves with suitable arms in case of emergency."

"In case of what emergency?" asked one of the merchants.

"If the French come here and take the place, we shall be attacked, of course," answered Mr. Drury.

"Attacked! By whom?" asked the Consul in some alarm. This view of the question had evidently never presented itself to his mind.

"By the Chinese. What distinction will they make between the foreigners of Kantow and all other foreigners?"

CHAPTER VIII.

Silence fell upon the company. Visions of massacres and treacheries in past days, some days not so very long past, rose up before their minds' eyes. What if the Tientain massacre should be repeated, or the Canton riots, or . . . ? Each one could easily fill in the gaps. There was actually something like a scare for a good two minutes, but then some evil genius suggested :

"At any rate let us eat and drink, even if to-morrow we die. I vote we join the ladies."

Which Mr. Drury, for once in his life, was not sorry to do.

Isabel had not been having a particularly lively time in the drawing-room. Mrs. Drury had taken forcible possession of Mrs. Clay, and had carried her off to one of the open windows, where they sat discussing servants and babies with all the usual ardour of after-dinner conversations. Baby-talk had a great fascination for Mrs. Smith, who soon joined the magic circle, and Isabel was left roaming about the room by herself, touching the flowers, turning up the lamps, listening in vain for the ladies in the window to start a more amusing subject. But there was no chance of this with Mrs. Clay among them. Whenever the conversation flagged, she took it up with renewed vigour. And none of them seemed to notice in the least that their hostess was left out in the cold. Mrs. Drury moved the chairs about just as she had been accustomed to do when Mr. Reynolds was a

bachelor and she had played hostess for him. And Isabel was child enough to feel vexed by this.

"Wait till I have got my chance! Won't I make her smart!" she muttered to herself between her closed teeth. But Mrs. Drury saw nothing of her expression, and was not conscious of having done anyone wrong. She was simply observing the enemy on her own ground.

Happily, the gentlemen came in before long, the younger men still tittering over some joke in the hall, the elder ones looking grave and important. Mrs. Clay straightened herself, Mrs. Drury crossed the room and took up a more important seat. Isabel stood just where she had been standing before, with one hand resting on a table, the other on the curtain of one of the windows. There de Borny found her after a search and tour of conversation with the other ladies.

"How are we going to amuse ourselves this evening, Mrs. Reynolds?" he asked, trying to catch her eye. Isabel was gazing down the room with an absent expression, as of one who is trying to see round a corner. She was, indeed, looking for someone who had not come in yet. That one was Angus Murray.

"I don't know," she answered, rather crossly, when de Borny had touched her fan lightly with his fingers, after repeating his question twice. "Anything you like."

Her face had changed its expression with her last words and had become eagerly expectant. De Borny coolly turned round and followed the direction of her eyes.

Two men had just come in through another verandah outside, where they had evidently been smoking. One was the Commissioner of Customs, the other was Angus Murray; and Angus was smiling right back to Isabel, and making a sort of telegraphic sign with his eyebrows in response to some unspoken question.

Decidedly, de Borny was second fiddle with Mrs. Reynolds to-night. And it vexed him to be anything else but first. For

how could he now demonstrate to Mrs. Drury and the whole female population of Kantow what a very desirable cavalier he could make, when the lady of the house herself absolutely ignored, or rather repulsed, his devotion? De Borny had looked upon this dinner-party as a proper occasion for shining, for showing how cleverly he could make hostile elements agree, simply by the charm of his master presence. Was there any masher in Kantow equal to himself? Was not Isabel herself a slave to his smile on ordinary occasions? And why should this miserable tea-taster, who had only got a moustache and a pair of fine legs worth looking at, come down and cut him out? It was monstrous, almost an insult!

Quite an insult it became when Isabel suddenly, without a word of apology, left him standing alone and walked towards Angus and the Commissioner. Mrs. Drury did not notice this proceeding, nor mark the blackness of de Borny's look, for she was busily engaged in searching through various photograph albums for some clue which might help her to trace out Isabel's past life. And meanwhile Isabel and her two companions had gone out into the cool verandah, and the Commissioner found himself superintending and countenancing a very free and easy conversation between the two friends, which, strange to say, did not shock him in the very least, but only appeared delightfully natural and unaffected.

But if Isabel and the Commissioner were totally dead to all considerations of "look-see," the handsome Angus was not. Already he fancied he had seen Mr. Reynolds peeping round the corner of a curtain, and as he himself felt slightly guilty as to his former conduct at the Avenue Theatre, he was now most firmly resolved not to compromise himself in the eyes of the Consul. So, much as he enjoyed laughing and talking with his old love, he was prudent enough to tear himself away, and, passing suddenly through a window, to devote himself assiduously to Mrs. Clay.

The two walkers stood still for one moment after his abrupt departure, as though expecting him to come back again. Then, as though by common consent, they resumed their walk, at first in silence.

"Mr. Drury," began Isabel suddenly, as though an idea had just entered her brain, "you always tell the truth, don't you?"

To say Mr. Drury was struck dumb would be to use too mild an expression for the state of that excellent man's feelings. He looked at Isabel with the alarmed air of one who has just met a water-buffalo on a very narrow path. Then, seeing she really expected an answer, he said :

"As much as most people, I hope, Mrs. Reynolds."

"Tell me, then," Isabel went on rather more quickly, "why does your wife hate me?"

He might have known that this was coming, and yet Oliver Drury was quite unprepared for it. He pulled out a large silk handkerchief, and nervously—actually nervously, dabbed his face. But Isabel had gone on still further ; she was evidently working off some steam that had been accumulating for a considerable time :

"It's of no use your denying that she hates me, Mr. Drury, because you know she does. But at any rate I don't mind, because I've made up my mind to be happy at Kantow, and it doesn't matter what the other women think of me. Only I'd like to be friends with you, Mr. Drury, please, so don't let your wife quarrel outright with me."

And Mr. Drury saw a hand held out towards him which he was, of course, as a gentleman, bound to shake. What man would have done otherwise in his position? But he felt it his duty to add, in a very kind voice, for he seemed like a father scolding a naughty child :

"Mrs. Drury will be good friends with you, I am sure, Mrs. Reynolds. Only you must remember she is older, and, naturally, more experienced than you are."

"I doubt it," laughed Isabel, a little nervous laugh, quite different from her usual noisy one. "But I want friends now, and I'll try and be good as you say."

"Why now?" asked Mr. Drury, before he well knew what he was saying. But Isabel did not answer. She was half through one of the open windows, and de Borny was whispering something in her ear.

Mr. Drury was far too simple to dream for an instant that Isabel was trying to flirt with him, to flirt by the most ordinary, most antiquated means—by exciting pity in the susceptible male bosom as the first step to love. To give Isabel full credit on her side, she did not particularly want the Commissioner to fall in love with her. But he was one who stood aloof from all ladies, and was therefore a victim worth the getting. Then she was vexed with Angus Murray for deserting her, and for one little moment had felt a trifle forlorn and friendless. Add to this that her theatrical life had taught her a few of the most effectual ways of spiting female foes, and it will not be difficult to understand why Mrs. Reynolds had pitched upon Mr. Drury as the man with whom her name was to be coupled in Kantow and in Banca when the Queen's Birthday party was spoken of.

Mr. Drury took another turn along the verandah, cogitating over Isabel's words. He did not much like them, now the speaker herself was away. They cast a slur on his wife, well-deserved, perchance, but unacceptable from that particular quarter. And then Mr. Drury gave himself a shake mentally, called himself a snob for thinking slightingly of Mrs. Reynolds, and, like the good fly that he was, came back to the candle to be, not scorched, but warmed.

"Yes, do let us. And begin now!" Isabel was saying eagerly to de Borny, who, with his peculiar smirk, was leaning back against the open window fanning himself with his hostess's fan.

"Will the Consul agree?" asked the Frenchman, with a look over his shoulder towards Mr. Reynolds, who was devoting himself almost abjectly to Mrs. Drury.

"Doesn't matter; won't ask him!" said Isabel saucily. "Get Mr. Clay to play, there's a good boy. And arrange it all as quick as you can. My feet are itching for it already!"

"You? you are sure to dance divinely!" whispered de Borny confidentially. "No one will be able to touch you here!" And he was gone in a moment, leaving Isabel with her face just a tinge pinker than usual, but none the less pretty because the colour was natural.

"What are you going to do now, Mrs. Reynolds?" asked Mr. Drury, stepping in through the window.

"Dance," she answered, without the least nervous start at his sudden appearance. Isabel's nerves, like her health, were in magnificent order.

"No!" he said, in a tone between surprise and entreaty, though why he should have felt the slightest concern about Isabel's actions astonished even himself. "You are surely not going to dance?"

"And why not?" asked Isabel, turning round on him with the utmost calmness. "Are not the floors safe enough?"

"Oh yes, quite safe," said the Commissioner, feeling himself caught in a very awkward position. "But"—and here, of course, he stopped short. Indeed, why should she not dance? Who would think anything of her dancing? Who would guess that this had been her profession in old times? There was no one who knew her secret there, except Angus Murray, and he was safe as the grave. No, the Commissioner could have no objections.

But there was someone else who had. For next moment the thin form of Mr. Reynolds, looking more ghostly than ever by reason of the paleness of his face, had glided round the room and stood by Isabel's side.

"Isabel, my dear," he said in an undertone only audible by his wife and the Commissioner, who, being hedged in by an accumulation of chairs, could not make his escape, "for God's sake, don't dance."

"Why for God's sake?" asked Isabel in her usual tone of voice. "Why shouldn't I dance?"

Three or four heads turned in her direction. The Commissioner began hastily to examine a water-colour sketch on the wall close beside him.

"Hush!" whispered Mr. Reynolds again. "Can't you think why? I say, don't talk so loud. Let the others dance if you like, but please don't yourself."

And he slid away again, and took up a post of observation half-way down the room.

"What a bother!" muttered Isabel, slightly tapping, not stamping, her foot. But after all she was a good-hearted girl, and so when Angus Murray came up and asked her to join him in the first waltz, she refused.

Mr. Clay seated himself at the piano, and began to thunder forth the most wonderfully spirited music. To look at him, no one would have judged him capable of producing anything but the feeblest sounds. But appearances here were deceitful. His music, at any rate, was such as to send the Kantow community dancing-mad. Couple after couple, mostly, of course, men, whirled round and round the drawing-room, out into the hall, round the dining-table, to the great astonishment of the China boys who were busy there, back again, down the verandah, up once more, and still the music went on. Forgetful of fashion or heat, Mrs. Drury gathered her velvet skirts around her and tripped it off on Angus Murray's arm. Mrs. Clay followed suit with Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith with the doctor. And Isabel Reynolds stood biting her lips in the window, her foot tapping time, and her eyes looking imploringly toward the Consul, who kept his resolutely bent on the ground.

"Now it is our turn, Mrs. Reynolds," someone said just behind Mr. Drury. Both he and Isabel started, as Eve might have started when she saw the serpent first appear in the Garden of Eden. Mr. Drury moved to one side to make room for de Berny, who, having started everyone else, had found his way to Isabel along the verandah.

"No, thank you," Mrs. Reynolds said rather quickly. "I am not going to dance to-night."

"Not dance!" cried de Berny in the most genuine amazement. "Not dance! when it was simply for you I arranged this? Come, it is too ridiculous. You simply must dance."

And suiting the action to the word, he drew her hand through his arm.

"No," said Isabel decidedly enough. "I am not going to dance. Yes, I am quite well, thank you. And I want to dance, too, but the Consul doesn't want me to."

It was just like Isabel, to put out the whole unpleasant truth in her childishly selfish way. Both de Berny and Mr. Drury felt themselves made uncomfortable by it. But of course the Frenchman was not to be repulsed, having once made up his mind that Isabel should dance, so Mr. Drury, to his horror (though he was obliged to admit to himself that he would have done precisely the same in his place), heard de Berny say:

"It is such utter nonsense that I shall go myself and ask Mr. Reynolds if you may not dance with me. You will come, will you not, if he agrees?"

"Yes, certainly," said Isabel eagerly. This was precisely what she had wanted and meant de Berny to do when she told him Mr. Reynolds had forbidden her.

"Mrs. Reynolds," Oliver Drury found himself saying before he had time to reflect, "don't do it."

"Why?" asked Isabel in an indifferent tone, though, truth to tell, she did not feel in the least bit indifferent about the answer.

"Mostly because your husband doesn't want you to," said the Commissioner more slowly. "I am sure you will be sorry for it afterwards."

"I'm never sorry, never can be, for anything that gives me five minutes' pleasure in this deadly hole!" was the quick answer. "It's all nonsense on the Consul's part, and he'll be the first to admit it himself to-morrow. Why, if the Duke hadn't come I should have been obliged to ask you to dance with me!"

This was an effectual silencer for Mr. Drury. He involuntarily drew back a step or two, and almost knocked against de Borny, who was returning in triumph from Mr. Reynolds.

"Oh yes, of course he agreed at once!" said the gallant Frenchman in answer to Isabel's raised eyebrows. "Make haste and begin, Clay will be getting tired."

Isabel kept her eyes resolutely turned away from Mr. Reynolds and the Commissioner, so she did not see, and therefore was not moved by, the abject look of pleading from the one and the grave expression of disapprobation from the other. No, she had been determined to dance, and now she had got her own way. And very happy in it she was for the next quarter of an hour.

CHAPTER IX.

One by one the other dancers were beginning to drop off, the stouter ladies and their partners first, even the younger men afterwards. But Isabel and de Borny were fresh at it, they had excellent lungs, beautifully fitting shoes, and were both in their element. For if de Borny had won his laurels hitherto by being able to dance with what in a woman most nearly resembles a cow, his delight may be imagined when he found himself moving along in harmony with a professional dancer. Isabel was utterly oblivious of all her surroundings, only conscious of that deliciously all-pervading excitement which follows on a peculiar arrangement and sequence of notes on an instrument. And so it was no wonder that the spectators marvelled, as this couple, left entirely alone, danced on and on till Mr. Clay's fingers gave way, and then remained standing still in the middle of the room as though waiting for the music to begin again.

"How beautifully Mrs. Reynolds dances!" remarked Mrs. Smith to the Consul, who was standing behind her, clutching nervously at her chair. "I don't think I ever saw anyone dance so well."

"Oh no, I don't think she dances at all particularly well," said poor Mr. Reynolds hurriedly. "I don't think she dances nearly as well as you, Mrs. Drury," he adued. Poor man, he was in such a fright lest anyone should ask him how Isabel had

learned her dancing, when she had danced last, or any of those thousand and one questions which a guilty conscience is always anticipating but which so rarely come, that he was on the high road to running his own head into the very noose he was so desirous of avoiding.

Thus appealed to, Mrs. Drury answered curtly enough :

"Not at all. Mrs. Reynolds dances in quite a peculiar way of her own. I could never attempt to copy her."

Was there malice, or a genuine admission of inferiority, in Mrs. Drury's words? The Consul could not make out. But here Angus Murray unfortunately blundered in :

"I thought Mrs. Reynolds was not going to dance to-night. She told me so."

"Ah, I advised her not to do so at first," stammered Mr. Reynolds, getting uncomfortably warm. "But she is so mad on it, that you see——"

The whole room was going off again, but with a general shift of partners. De Borny came up to Mrs. Drury and offered her his arm. And as he and Angus Murray were the best dancers in Kantow, of course he was not refused.

"Dance with me, Angus," young Murray heard Isabel say close behind him. "Or sit it out, if you like best. I want to talk to you."

Angus turned round with a very grave face. "Dance." And the two set off, not in the mad way that Isabel and de Borny had done, but quietly and smoothly, as brother might dance with sister. Talk, however, Angus would not on any but the most trivial subjects. Isabel felt piqued, if not grieved, still more, and it may have been in consequence of this that Mrs. Drury and her partner, resting for a moment's breath, heard her say distinctly, as she and Angus slowly moved past them :

"I would give anything for the old days, Angus."

"Hoity toity!" thought Mrs. Drury to herself. "So Angus Murray is the key that unlocks this past, after all! Then it will not take me long to find everything out. Good."

"Mrs. Drury," said de Borny as they, too, moved off again, "is it the fashion among you English ladies to call gentlemen by their Christian name?"

"No, I believe not," said Mrs. Drury in a slightly mystified tone. She did not remember, most likely had not heard, this to which he was referring.

"Oh, I presume they do it in the theatre," said the Frenchman maliciously, looking at his partner. But Mrs. Drury had missed the connecting link, and only looked more puzzled. De Borny evidently intended some innuendo, but concerning whom she could not guess.

And Oliver Drury? He did not dance on any occasion. But to-night he also did not walk about the garden by himself, or talk to the Consul, or amuse himself with the ornaments of the room. He simply leant against his window and let his brain go wandering after a certain cropped but curly head which danced, and danced, and danced, as lightly as ever Camilla stepped over the corn. And as he looked for the face to appear and to disappear it seemed to him quite to change its character and expression. This was not a loud, noisy, underbred woman, who was trying to trample under foot all and everyone that did not suit her fancy, but a child-artist, who was innocent and healthy enough to enjoy motion for the motion's sake, without afterthought and also without purpose. So great an effect did a pair of pink silk stockings, a pretty face, and the smile of one who has got her own way, have upon a sensible, unsentimental man of thirty-three.

Isabel danced with no one else but Angus for the rest of that evening. His good resolutions had entirely broken down during the first dance, and having salved his conscience with

the remembrance that he was to leave for Banca at daylight next morning, the excellent Angus had made up his mind to enjoy himself thoroughly that evening. Now of course a good dancer prefers dancing with the best dancer in the room. And so it came to pass that the Duc de Borny, thanks to whom alone this dancing had been got up, found himself entirely cut off from Isabel, ogled her in vain—in short, had to put up with Mrs. Drury as second-best, only from fear of falling into the hands of Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Clay, who both danced atrociously.

And Isabel, foolish Isabel, of course she acted as imprudently as ever. Long before she had put herself into de Borny's power by showing him her album of theatrical friends, which lately Mr. Reynolds had got possession of and locked up, and even pointed out her own self in what the ladies of Kantow would have called a most shocking and indecent dress. And now she was actually imbecile enough to provoke and dare this foreigner, who had picked up all of English that was faulty in his intercourse with that nation in China, and had added it to his keen French sense of honour, of slight, or of insult. So he took it very much amiss, if not as a deliberate wound to his self-love, when Isabel calmly turned her back on him when he came up to speak to her, refused his request to dance in the most off-hand fashion, and, was it possible? actually mimicked his voice and gesture. And Mr. Reynolds—of course he always did the right thing at the wrong time!—applied the match to the heaped-up fuel by putting the great Duc in a decidedly awkward position. For, as the touchy Frenchman stood out one dance, Mrs. Drury having succumbed to the heat of her velvet gown, and Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Clay being also nearly dead, the one from the tightness of her lacing and the other from a weakness about the breath, the Consul came up and whispered confidentially :

"Can't you get hold of Mrs. Reynolds after this dance and persuade her to stop? She must be tired, since all the other ladies are."

So much the more reason that she should not be tired, de Borny knew. But the mission was one he did not object to undertake, as he really desired nothing more than some authority to be delegated to him over Isabel. So, having intimated to Mr. Clay that it was time to stop, he crossed the room and intercepted Isabel, who was on her way to the piano to ask the musician to continue the waltz.

"Mrs. Reynolds, the Consul desires me to ask you not to dance any more. He thinks you must be tired, as everyone else is."

Isabel looked from de Borny to her husband, who was trying to obliterate himself behind a Japanese screen. This action and attitude and tone of familiarity of the Frenchman, so different from Angus's manner and words, grated on her most unpleasantly. And, as a natural result, she got angry, and in consequence of getting angry, she became offensive.

"Tell the Consul," she said, and her voice sounded like that of a war trumpet to de Borny's ear, though, in reality, it was scarcely more raised than usual and very few people could have heard it, "that if he wants to say anything to me he had better come and say it, and not send messages!"

And the moment she had said this she repented it. For de Borny, with wonderful self-control, allowed not a muscle of his face to move. He merely bowed, and turning on his heel walked away.

But Isabel's evening was spoilt. Mr. Clay went on playing, and she and Angus went on dancing, but he seemed to be getting tired, and had no more jokes ready, and Isabel wanted jokes, or talk, or anything that would keep her mind from thinking. But it was all of no use. Each turn in the dance

seemed only to bring her in sight of de Borny, who was bending most assiduously over Mrs. Drury, without eyes or ears for anyone else. Isabel wanted him to look up, to catch her eye, that she might telegraph an apology, but he steadily kept his face turned away. And finally, when she came back into the drawing-room after a short stroll with Angus in the verandah, he had disappeared. No wonder, after all, as the clock had just struck half-past twelve. Mrs. Clay, Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Drury were all standing in a group preparatory to saying good-night, and Mr. Drury had left his window for a few parting words with the Consul.

There was the usual fuss and excitement of helping the ladies into the chairs, the usual "Good-nights" shouted from inside elegant wraps, the final whiskies-and-sodas in the dining-room, and the last shakings of hands on the verandah steps. Angus had quite steadied himself again by this time, and was merely the casual masquerade acquaintance when he took leave of his hostess. But there was one man in the group which walked up the hill together who neither joined in the discussion on the hostess, nor criticised the food, nor expressed any opinion about the dancing. And yet that man was the one whose opinion ought to have been the most worth having. For he had been merely a spectator in an open window.

And Isabel? Anticipating a curtain lecture from Mr. Reynolds, she yawned three or four times in succession, took up a candle and went off to bed. But when she was dressing next morning she found, somewhat to her disgust, that she could not look back with unmixed pleasure on last night's proceedings. There was something uncomfortable about them. What had she done? She had been, oh, most particularly polite to all the ladies. To all the gentlemen, too. Ah, there was that silly de Borny, who would be taking offence at what she had not intended in the least to be offensive. Well, she could

not help it now. And after all, he had only been jealous of Angus Murray, and it would be all right now Angus was away at Banca, and he himself master of the field.

"All the same, it is awkward," she mused to herself as the boy rapped at her door to announce breakfast, "that I am so made that I can only be great friends with one man at a time."

Awkward, indeed, very awkward. It was only a wonder that Isabel had not found this out long before.

CHAPTER X.

"What can have happened to de Borny, Isabel? He hasn't been here for quite a week now."

Mr. Reynolds did not add how very delighted he was at this absence of the elegant Frenchman, nor that he had not ventured upon this subject of conversation till he had seen, from a special post of observation in the dressing-room, de Borny walking up the hill towards Mrs. Drury's house. But as Isabel vouchsafed no answer, and he felt perfectly safe as regarded the possible visitor, he went on:

"You must have done something to offend him, Isabel, on the Queen's Birthday. He has never set foot in the house since."

Thus challenged, Isabel felt herself bound to retort: "I offend him? What on earth should I do to offend him? And what do I care if he is offended? The loss is all on his side."

"Not exactly, my dear, not exactly," Mr. Reynolds put in. "The loss can be on your side, too. That is, you know, he is a Frenchman, and——"

"And what?" demanded Isabel, getting more pink in the face than she cared to be.

"Why, you have shown him those photographs, and talked so imprudently about, about—— Remember, I warned you at the time!" There was a small degree of ill-advised triumph

in Mr. Reynolds' tone that exasperated Isabel beyond all bearing.

"What photographs do you mean? And why on earth don't you speak out straight, instead of keeping on beating about the bush? It's really ridiculous in a man of your age."

Mrs. Reynolds had found out by this time that the Consul was very sensitive about one point—his age. It was, of course, mean of her to twit him about it, but then whenever she was provoked she fell back upon her green-room tactics. And in these, as has already been said, the grand object was to be as personal as possible.

"My dear Isabel," said Mr. Reynolds in a mortified tone, "I'm not your enemy, nor so very particularly older than you are, that you should answer me in this way. I repeat it, as I have always said to you, *de Borny* is dangerous as a friend or as a foe. And I'm afraid you've made a foe of him, though how I don't know. And he will make use of that theatrical album of yours if he isn't prevented, and how is one to prevent him?"

"I don't care if he does make use of it!" cried Isabel angrily. "What! do you think I am ashamed of my profession? Don't you think it makes me worth six times as much as these other women, who couldn't earn a sixpence to save their lives? No, I've said nothing about it, because you had some rubbishy notion that your position would be injured by it, but I swear now—yes, I swear, and you needn't look so shocked about it—that I'll say it out to everyone, and take the wind out of the Duke's sails, if so be that he means to go and whisper things about me!"

"Hush, hush, my dear!" said the poor Consul in terror. "You don't know who may be listening to you now. Do be reasonable, for goodness' sake don't go and do anything rash. What will the people here say?"

"The people!" cried Isabel louder than ever. "And who are your fine people, pray? A pack of wretched twopenny-halfpenny merchants, without an ounce of brains or wits among them? Or the women! Just look at them, pray. They are like a lot of cooks or housekeepers, and only fit to be married to such men! I wouldn't be like one of them for all the gold in the world."

The force with which Isabel set down her cup on her saucer ought to have convinced Mr. Reynolds that it was high time to close the discussion. But he was unfortunately not particularly gifted with tact, and besides, to his wife's words and sentiments as regarded the Kantow community, he really took great exception. So he persisted in:

"Mrs. Drury is one of the most charming and intellectual women in South China."

"Pity you didn't marry her, then," sneered Isabel, who was fanning herself into a quieter temper. "You had better go now and make yourself agreeable to her. I am going out for a walk."

"It's too hot, it's too hot, Isabel! You are sure to get fever, or get among the soldiers!" Mr. Reynolds called after her. Of course his words were simple waste of breath. Isabel had thrown on a wide soft tennis hat, and armed herself with a huge umbrella. Then with a "Good-by!" shouted out, she crossed the sun-lined garden, passed below the old Red Fort, and began to descend the hill by a winding corkscrew path under the great branches and hanging roots of the banian trees.

A beautiful jungle it was down below the hill. Almost in a single day the branches of the different trees had been joined and made into one great tent-roof, or rather carpet, by wild convolvulus, the delicate purple blossoms of which nearly dazzled Isabel's eyes as she began to descend the hill. And then, below, out of the sun and in the cool shade, what an immensity of ferns and white Annunciation lilies! Again, there was the boundary wall, of

stones laid together without any mortar, every now and then broken by an embrasure, in which lay an old forgotten cannon, relic of the days when the Dutch had frowned down on the natives from within their mighty fort. It was very little that Isabel knew of the past history of Kantow, but she had read, since she came out to China at any rate, enough sensational novels to imagine that this fort and its grounds were exactly fitted for murders, elopements or robberies, or any of those other little excitements which are needed to stimulate the female thirst for reading.

But here was the old stone gateway, flanked by a tumble-down joss house, home of countless horrors in the shape of snakes and centipedes, but beautiful by reason of situation and creepers. Isabel passed through two modern wooden gates, bearing the inscription H.B.M. Consul, an inscription which somehow or other always flattered her self-love, and made her see many redeeming qualities in Mr. Reynolds. Then she descended some very shaky stone steps, and turned off towards the right, where stood the Custom House with its long low white line of buildings, the signal-staff with the dragon-flag floating from the top of it, and the godowns, boat-houses and Customs Library below it, stretching down to the Customs jetty.

The offices were deserted, for it was nearly five o'clock, and work had stopped at four, very punctually. Some soldiers were loitering near the weighing-shed, and many more were engaged, under the direction of some petty officers, in trying to convey a huge torpedo towards a camp some quarter of a mile distant. Very huge and very awkward a machine it looked, slung in ropes over the shoulders of some twenty or thirty men, who moved slowly along to a kind of chant or refrain, which, oddly enough, persisted in calling up the image of a donkey to Isabel's mind. However, she did not linger to listen to it, being most irrationally afraid that somehow she would come to grief by the mere fact of

being in the presence of this monstrous mass of iron. And so, after about a quarter of an hour's brisk walking, she got beyond all the soldiers, beyond the point and the rocks where a great White Beacon raised itself up to heaven, and fishermen's nets lay drying in the sun, and having jumped one or two streams that were trickling down into the river, she found herself on a great stretch of yellow sand, with nothing but the river on the one side, and on the other distant orange-groves, screw-pine, sand hillocks and paddy-fields, with an occasional wolfish-looking China dog taking its ease under the shadow of a fishing-boat drawn up on the beach.

Quite unlike Kantow, but also quite unlike England, as Isabel had always known it. Perhaps it was strange in a cockney, for it is needless to say Isabel was only Scotch by name, to choose this solitary beach for her favourite walk. But then movement and exercise were absolutely necessary to her strong frame, and the only other way of obtaining them in Kantow was on the tennis-ground, and there Isabel could not shine. The white road, or rather track, that ran past the great Consulate gates ended, soon after the cluster of bungalows and the great red house on the hill, in a dirty Chinese village and paddy-fields. The downs above and beyond the foreign settlement swarmed with Chinese braves, all busy in throwing up the earth-works, but with plenty of leisure to throw a clod of earth after the barbarian, or follow him or her with persistence for a mile or so, casting envious eyes, even greedy hands, on any bracelet or ornament that barbarian might be wearing. So Mrs. Reynolds generally chose the beach, where she had a fixed point to make for, a mound of stones surmounted by a little hut for the lamp which served as a landmark to junks coming into the river at night. It was about a mile and a half along the beach, and when she got there she was on a narrow strip of ground between two seas—the mouth of the river on the one hand and a sheltered bay on the other. Best of all, she had it to herself.

For, fond as she was of congenial, that is, exciting, society, Isabel had found since she came to Kantow that there were great charms in solitude. The soft sleepy climate may have had something to do with this change in her disposition, the marked desertion of herself by de Borny on the tennis-ground from very early days may have helped to increase it. Mrs. Reynolds had experienced some sensations very nearly akin to humiliation from the members of her own sex in their afternoon meeting. None of them, she had argued somewhat bitterly, had minded coming to her house and amusing themselves there, but they had all tried as much as they could to spoil her enjoyment. Of course she was quite unjust in this, but there can be little doubt that Mrs. Smith had written her off as "fast," Mrs. Clay as "vulgar," Mrs. Drury as "coarse." And they could not help showing what they felt in their manner to her. To be "good fun" to young men alone is an unsatisfactory part for a pretty young married woman who feels herself fit for better things. And so Isabel found herself on this particular afternoon in a mood of hatred towards the women, and of contempt towards the men, headed by de Borny. In this mood a quiet walk along the beach, while it would make her thoroughly tired, would also give her an appetite for dinner, and therefore make Mr. Reynolds' necessary presence a shade more acceptable than it seemed at present.

Here was the Black Beacon at last, with its flight of rough projecting stones leading to the little house above. It was always cool up there, even on the very hottest days, and Isabel was decidedly warm. There was no one to see or criticise her, except a couple or more of fishermen among the oyster-beds some quarter of a mile away. So Isabel raised her petticoats higher than Mrs. Drury would have approved of, and began the ascent.

Crash! a stone was loosened from its place and went bumping down all the way on to the sand below. That was a contingency that Isabel was always fully prepared for, so, after watching its

fall, she began to mount again. But there was something more about the Black Beacon to-day than she had ever looked for, and though she was not nervous, her heart seemed to jump almost into her mouth when she heard a voice saying, from somewhere above her, that is, from inside the little house itself :

" May I give you a hand, Mrs Reynolds ? It is rather a difficult pull up."

And Oliver Drury appeared in the doorway.

For one moment Isabel stood still, as much abashed as it was possible for her to feel, with the consciousness of the ungracefulness of her attitude. Yet she did not dare to let go her petticoats ; that would imperil her footing. There, indeed, she was stuck, for the ledge she was resting on was too narrow to admit of her turning round to go down, and too far from the sands for a jump. So she made up her mind to carry it through, and called back :

" I'm coming up all right, thanks. Make room for me on the top step."

For answer Oliver Drury leaned over the side of the mound, and stretched out his hand. And Isabel without further ceremony grasped it, and was drawn up on to the little platform above.

" Ah ! it is cool here !" she said quite composedly, taking off the big felt hat, and fanning herself with it vigorously. " This is the first time I have been cool to-day. It is heavenly !"

Then she settled herself down on the rough window-ledge that looked out over the sea in this rough little lighthouse, and turned round towards her companion. He was leaning against the door-way, twisting, actually twisting, his sun-hat in his fingers. There was something almost comic, an air of the country yokel, about this man in this place. His white coat and trousers, somewhat soiled as they were by climbing, may have added to this. And his good-natured, handsomely-cut face looked confused enough to please any rustic beauty with a sense of her power.

"Why did you come here?" Isabel asked him after a moment's pause. She was not quite pleased at being disturbed in her own private place.

"I might ask: Why did you come here?" was the rejoinder. "But as that wouldn't be satisfactory to either of us: I came here to have a look at the lamps, on my way back from bathing. I will just do my business now and go away if my presence is at all inconvenient to you."

He evidently expected some answer to this, but Mrs. Reynolds gave him none for a minute. So he moved about the little house on tip-toe, turned over the heap of lamps in one corner, made some notes in a pocket-book, and then walked to the doorway, where he turned round and took off his hat again.

"No, stay," said Isabel quickly, somewhat to Mr. Drury's surprise. He had just been trying to make up his mind that though the Consul's wife was very pretty and could make herself charming when she chose, yet she could be very much the opposite when she did not choose. In which idea, after all, he would have been quite correct, only unfortunately those two last words entirely altered his opinion.

"You want to be alone, do you not, Mrs. Reynolds?" he asked, scarcely liking to trust his ears. "You don't care to play tennis with the other ladies!"

"No, not at all. But I'd like you to stay and talk to me now. I'm in a bad temper, and I want to be soothed and quieted. Besides which, you came here first, and if anyone ought to go, it is I."

This, of course, Mr. Drury stoutly denied. At the same time he sat down on the door-step, with his head turned away from the view, and his eyes fixed on Mrs. Reynolds' face. It was a comfortable attitude for him, and it was one Isabel was perfectly accustomed to. Still, some months had now elapsed since anyone had, so to speak, set her up on a pedestal and placed himself in a

lower position. Besides, there was the comfortable feeling of how vexed Mrs. Drury, her arch-enemy, would be if by chance she happened to take a stroll in the direction of the Black Beacon that afternoon. And though Mrs. Reynolds had made up her mind for solitude, she was scarcely the woman to object to that solitude being shared by one who might very possibly blossom into an adorer.

For the next few minutes, however, she might just as well have been alone. Mr. Drury sat quiet, waiting for her to open the conversation, and Isabel had nothing particular to say. She sat on her window-ledge, crumbling a piece of lime into dust and apparently gazing out over the water. In reality, she was thinking over the conversation with her husband at the tea-table, and wondering if she could find out from the Commissioner if de Borny had really taken offence at her lightly-spoken words, and was spreading among the Kantow community a garbled version of her former life. But this was dangerous ground to tread on. Not that Isabel would have hesitated for a moment in entrusting this man, almost stranger as he was, with any secret. His face spoke for his trustworthiness, if not also for—why deny it?—his susceptibility to a pretty woman. Yet it was an awkward subject to begin upon, seeing that the theatrical profession was evidently not considered as conferring a distinction upon its members in Kantow. Thinking over how she was to say it, nevertheless, made Mrs. Reynolds feel more and more uncomfortable, so she found herself blurting out without much further delay: “Mr. Drury, do you know what I was before I was married to Mr. Reynolds?”

And then she became all of a sudden quite at her ease. For by the guilty colour and rise in temperature which made Oliver Drury mop his face in great confusion immediately, she knew that her secret was out. Now she could triumph over Mr. Reynolds and dare the select ladies of Kantow openly.

De Borny, too, he had done all he could do. There was not quite so much triumph about that; Isabel could not help feeling mortified that a man she had once treated with her confidence should go over to the enemy. And there was a faint hope, very faint, in her mind that, after all, the gossip had not originated with the Frenchman when she next spoke.

"It is only lately you have known this, is it not? Who was it who told you first?"

"Oh, no, I knew it long ago," answered Mr. Drury, turning away his eyes from her eager face. "It would not interest you at all to know who told me. I would rather not say the name."

"Long ago!" repeated Isabel in wonderment. "How is it no one said anything to me if it was known long ago! I thought you people in Kantow were so precious good that a person who had been on the stage was a regular black sheep! Perhaps they were trying to convert me!" she added with a sneer. Mr. Drury shook his head.

"There is no one very good here, Mrs. Reynolds—that is, no one better than yourself. How could they try to convert you? Why should they think you needed to be converted?"

The conversation was taking an uninteresting turn for Isabel. Mr. Drury evidently wanted to draw her attention away from what Kantow said or thought about her. Unfortunately, Mrs. Reynolds had a craving to know everything about these reports, whether they were bad or good. She felt she would rather have a celebrity as a great sinner than have none at all; so she returned to the charge:

"It was the Duc de Borny who told you, was it not?"

Mr. Drury turned and looked at her before he answered. There was something akin to vexation in the look, as though de Borny's name had an unpleasant ring coming from her mouth. But he answered quite bravely:

"No, it was not de Borny. I don't think he knows anything about it."

Not know anything about it! Isabel knew better, though she had not courage enough to say so. At any rate the Duc could not be so very angry with her, or so very malicious, since he had not told his chief. It was just like Mr. Reynolds, after all, to imagine offences where none existed. He had always been wrong hitherto in his forebodings, and here he was wrong again. Still, how far was the news known in Kantow? That was a point which it would be as well to clear up.

"Mr. Drury." Isabel was leaning forward now, partly to avoid a line of sunlight which was coming round the window, partly to keep the Commissioner's face in sight even if he tried to turn it away. "Have you ever told Mrs. Drury?"

It ought to have struck Mr. Drury that this was a very awkward way of putting the question. But he felt so pleased at being able to give a satisfactory answer that he did not stop to consider this, but said :

"Not a lady in Kantow knows it, or is likely to know it, Mrs. Reynolds. You may feel quite easy about it."

CHAPTER XI.

Easy Mrs. Reynolds did feel, though she kept on trying to make herself think there was nothing to be easy about. But Mr. Reynolds had so often insisted upon it that to have been on the stage for ever damned a woman, that almost against her will, certainly against her better sense, Isabel had come to think somewhat the same. Certainly this was the opinion of everyone in Kantow, and as regarded her intercourse with them the Consul's fears had not been in vain. So Mrs. Reynolds felt happy and secure now, and as she owed this pleasant sensation to Oliver Drury there was nothing unfair, to her mind, in beginning this moment to make herself pleasant to him.

Deliciously cool came the breeze up from the sea to Oliver Drury as he sat there in the door-way of the Black Beacon with his eyes watching Isabel's face. There was not a trace of ill-temper left in it now, only an expression infinitely pleasing to Oliver, something of the child-artist look he had imagined she had worn on that evening of the Queen's Birthday. Isabel did not want him to talk ; she was always perfectly happy when she had a good listener. What she talked about, it is to be feared the Commissioner could not have passed an examination in. He was in a kind of dream or trance, a very strange state for a man of his calibre, but very enjoyable, when the waves breaking on the rocks outside now overtopped, now seemed to be an accompaniment

to such a gentle voice as Isabel's. Mrs. Drury would indeed have been horrified could she have seen her husband. For Oliver Drury was in the most immediate danger of falling head over ears in love, and that for the first time in his life.

As for Isabel, she also was perfectly happy. De Borny was not her enemy after all, but perhaps she had been a little unkind to him and he was now waiting to be called back into favour. Then she had walked off most of her vexation at her husband's prognostication, and had a very pleasant man to talk to, who was quite ready to stay with her and applaud her jokes, and think her a decidedly choice companion. It is needless to say that Mrs. Reynolds always infinitely preferred the society of men to that of women—she was not a phenomenon in this. But she liked best of all to have one man to talk to at a time, a sentiment which the favoured man undoubtedly shared. Mr. Drury would most likely not have thought Mrs. Reynolds so very charming had she been accompanied by de Borny, or Mr. Clay, or even by the Consul himself.

Still, Oliver Drury was quite sensible, not to say right-minded, enough, to cut short this interview after half an hour. Out came his watch duly, and up he started with well-feigned surprise at the hour. Isabel was vexed; the time seemed very short to her, and the Black Beacon would be very dull, the solitude all too oppressive after the lively conversation she had had. But the Commissioner was not yet too far gone—in fact, he prided himself upon not being gone at all—to do anything Mrs. Drury might resent if it came to her ears. So he resisted Mrs. Reynolds' request, put as charmingly as she could, that he would wait till she went and escort her home, pleading some very important office-work he had left unfinished. And he ruthlessly tore himself away without once looking back, although Isabel stood in the door-way of the hut with a handkerchief all ready to wave, and began energetically to think of business

as he strode along, so as to shut out from his mental vision a bright pair of blue eyes, a cropped curly head with a big felt hat, and drown the sounds of a voice fresh and sweet when lowered, by whistling a popular air which had made its way to Kantow some three years before.

As for Isabel, when she had watched Mr. Drury out of sight, she came down from the Black Beacon and made her way home by another path. This was through great entrenchments, inside which the ground was carpeted with sweet-smelling white lilies, and the tracks bristling with screw-pine and prickly cactus. On ordinary occasions Isabel would have found this difficult walking, for the soil was loose and sandy, the green jungle abounded in snakes, the grass-seeds stuck to her skirts and stockings, and after she had endured these miseries, there was the narrow raised path between heaps of paddy, with a stupid buffalo driven by a child of four or five standing straight in her way, very angry at her crimson sash, and requiring to be tugged at with all the urchin's strength before it would take an opposite direction. After the paddy-fields, the earth-works and the downs, now pretty well deserted by the soldiers. And then, all in a moment, the sun went out, fizz in the sea, and it began to get dark at once—for there are no twilights in Formosa.

Still Isabel felt quite happy, although Mr. Drury had, so to speak, run away from her, and although she had still some ten minutes' walk before she reached the Consulate. Yet it would have been difficult for her to have said why she felt so light-hearted. It was not altogether because Mr. Drury was in a sort of way committed to her, nor because de Borny had not deserted her, nor because she had been right and Mr. Reynolds wrong, nor because she had spent a Bohemian afternoon and was hungry, nor because Mrs. Drury's peace of mind was threatened, but a mixture of all of these. Actually, the Consul's

face peering out of the gate to look for her did not irritate her, but seemed like a tribute to her great value. And she walked up and down the garden with him, and asked questions about the tennis, and the ladies, and the Duc de Borny, in a way that both astonished and gratified Mr. Reynolds. After all, his wife was a charming woman, in spite of her having been an actress. He felt quite sorry when it was time to go in and get ready for dinner.

All this time the Commissioner had not been quite so happy as Mrs. Reynolds. The missionaries gave him credit for no conscience—how could he possess one, when he never came to church?—but they were vastly mistaken. That is, it was something very much resembling a conscience in a devout church-goer that made Mr. Drury decidedly uneasy the farther he got away from the Black Beacon. The Commissioner was horrified at himself when he caught himself comparing the size of Mrs. Drury's waist with that of Mrs. Reynolds. Indeed, what comparison could there be between them? None, assuredly, as regarded mental capacity. But here Mr. Drury found himself again thinking that what a man wants in a woman is not intellect, but sweetness. Now, of course, he could afford to compare the two. Mrs. Reynolds no one could call a sweet woman. She was abrupt, even to rudeness. But, Heaven help us! What was Mrs. Drury then? Had not her own father often warned her against becoming the contentious woman the wise man compared to a continual dropping on a very rainy day? Mr. Drury knew all too well, as he was bound to know after so many years of married life, how short his wife's temper was, and how long her tongue. No, after all, she was not any better in this respect than Isabel Reynolds.

He quite hailed the sight of the Custom House, where work was to drive away all these unpleasant thoughts and comparisons. The office was locked up and the office-boy

loitering about the jetty. He got a severer scolding for not being at hand than he had ever received before from the Commissioner. Every moment's space for thinking was becoming more and more unendurable. Yet he was not much better off at his desk with the piles of documents before him. The lamp they had brought him flickered and sputtered; there was no doing anything by its light. Oliver Drury locked up the desk and went home. As he passed the Consulate gate he could see above him, on the path that sloped gradually up towards the Red Fort, two figures walking, that of Mr. Reynolds grasping the arm of his wife. Somehow or other Mr. Drury did not like the attitude.

But when he reached his own door, Isabel's image perforce faded into the background. For the boy met him with the information that both Mrs. Drury and the head cook were down with fever, and that the quinine-bottle, which had unadvisedly been left within reach of all the servants, was empty. So the Commissioner had to trudge down to the doctor's, get another bottle and administer huge doses. In consequence of the cook's being ill, he had a very bad dinner. And as, with a sick wife, an empty stomach, and a brain that persisted in going back some three or four hours it was not a time to wage deadly war against the swarms of mosquitoes, the Commissioner betook himself early to bed.

Mrs. Drury's attack of fever, or, more properly, malaria, did not last long, but it left her not quite so robust in health as she had been before. There was no chance of her playing tennis for quite a week, although she could walk to the ground and watch the players. Mr. Drury was in the habit of going to bathe, at the sandy cove which was sheltered by the Black Beacon, every evening about five o'clock. The walk there he said did him good, the bathe undoubtedly so. Indeed, it was after one of these bathes that he first came across Isabel, on that sunny afternoon in the Black Beacon.

Just now, however, the Commissioner, to the great astonishment of all the Kantow community, began to appear on the tennis-ground. He brought Mrs. Drury, settled her very carefully in a shady place, and then stood at a little distance from the crowd which quickly gathered round her, evidently intently watching the game. He was a great player of racquets and despised lawn-tennis accordingly. When he was asked to join in a game, he invariably refused. But he did not want to talk also; he even seemed to try to avoid the Consul, who was always ready to buttonhole him, and enter upon long and fruitless disquisitions on the evilness of the times in which they were living. No, he wanted to be left alone, and yet he came to find this solitude in the very heart of Kantow society.

Meanwhile June had begun, and had even completed a week. The weather was getting decidedly hot; the hour for tennis was becoming half-past five instead of a quarter to that hour. Mrs. Drury was getting back her usual colour, though of course this was scarcely perceptible save to a practised eye, since she was powdered as much as usual. De Borny was becoming more and more attentive to her. He now usually came back with the Commissioner from the office, drank his cup of tea out of Mrs. Drury's delicate china, and then went off to his own house to adorn himself for the tennis-ground. It was a sign of increasing familiarity, this appearance before Mrs. Drury in his working attire, but it was one that good lady did not at all resent. She was always very fond of, and very kind to, young bachelors.

Oliver Drury, however, was not a young bachelor. He was well and strong, witness his appetite, and he had certainly no business to become moody and silent when his wife had just recovered from a sharp attack of fever. Exhortations to this effect, nevertheless, produced no apparent result. Mr. Drury came home as usual and de Borny generally reported he had behaved quite in an ordinary way at the office. But after four o'clock there came

in something not quite ordinary. The Commissioner had not got a word to say to his wife, brought her no pieces of news, did not seem to care what she was doing or how she was feeling. He never seemed to be listening to what she was saying, and entirely omitted various little attentions he had formerly paid her. Of course Mrs. Drury noticed this change immediately; her eagle eye was generally as wide-awake within her own house as without it. There was only one explanation: his liver was out of order, and about this she resolved to consult the doctor. But that worthy was not sympathetic; he was going home for a holiday shortly, and did not take as much interest in the livers of his patients as formerly. He only said: "Get Mr. Drury to take some more exercise, Mrs. Drury. Advise him to begin bathing again. Then you will soon find him quite well again."

The doctor was nearer the mark than he had imagined. And he prescribed the right remedy, although Mr. Drury's liver needed none.

For Oliver Drury was only most intensely unhappy. Strange as it may seem, he had actually hailed his wife's illness as furnishing him with a multitude of things to do, and so leaving him no time for thought. Mrs. Drury got better, alas! all too soon, and the Commissioner was thrown back on his own resources. He was indeed to be deeply pitied, for he was finding out to his sorrow every day with more certainty, that Isabel Reynolds was taking up far more room in his mind than she had any business to do. Every time he came home from the office and passed the Consulate gate he felt his heart beat suddenly quicker, and a wild hope spring up that Isabel would be looking over the wall, or at least walking up that long shady path. Every day he was disappointed, and went home to find Mrs. Drury in a temper, or busy, or entertaining visitors, with no surprise or pleasure at seeing him, no preparation for receiving him, with all the manner, in short, of a middle-aged, long-married woman.

Oliver would try to tell himself that his golden honeymoon time had passed—in reality, he knew it had never existed. Mrs. Drury was very good, very clever, very capable, but then she was older than he, oh, so many years older in disposition! And Oliver had felt himself young, and fit for folly, yet still a commander, not commanded, not many days before in the Black Beacon. Mrs. Drury could not compare favourably, not at all, with the girl he had held converse with there.

But Oliver Drury knew all too well that he was now beginning to walk on dangerous ground. A married man, he told himself, must not be friends with a married woman. Nothing but trouble to more parties than one calculates for can come out of it. It was not fair to Mrs. Drury, it was not fair to Mr. Reynolds. Isabel was a child, she could not be expected to consider all that, she would do something imprudent, and this time it would be great scandal, for the man concerned was not a de Borny. Then again, the Commissioner would represent to himself that he was counting his chickens before they were hatched, that there was nothing at all out of the way or uncommon, something indeed perfectly natural, in that he should occasionally meet Mrs. Reynolds, considering that all the world knew he went to bathe, and that she went to walk. Unfortunately, he could not keep in this beatific frame of mind. Every time he went up or down the hill to the office he knew that he was trembling on the verge of a moral precipice. As he went down, it did not seem such a dreadful one, for he was then fresh from the presence of Mrs. Drury, which was becoming more irksome to him every day. But every time he came up, the unlovely side of his home-life had become softened by distance, and Mrs. Drury appeared in the light of one who had always made his house pleasant, as far as in her lay, at any rate as one he could not dream of wronging. And as he felt that he must yield to the temptation of seeing Isabel Reynolds, and talking to her and liking to be with her, if he went

in the same direction as she did, he heroically made up his mind to give up bathing, at any rate for the present, and seek for safety on the tennis-ground.

Of course it was too unnatural a state of affairs to continue. Mr. Drury's liver did begin to be affected by his want of exercise before ten days were over. By this time Mrs. Drury was playing tennis again and de Borny was making himself conspicuous by his absence. He came to tea with Mrs. Drury, indeed, but he disappeared after it for the rest of the day. On the third occasion this began to alarm the Commissioner. Where, indeed, could anyone be, if not on the tennis-ground, but walking with Mrs. Reynolds? It was very wrong of Oliver Drury, no doubt, to have cared whether de Borny did, or did not, walk with Isabel. De Borny was a bachelor and free, while he was a staid married man. Nevertheless, he felt most horribly uneasy, it might almost be said, jealous, as he stood watching Mrs. Clay's balls fall from some indefinite height like rockets, out of his element yet scarcely daring even to dream of it.

"Your liver is out of order, Oliver," Mrs. Drury said to him decidedly that evening. "Dr. Fraser thinks so. Why don't you go and bathe as you used to do?"

"I am quite well," Mr. Drury answered, making a feeble struggle against the temptation to return to the old ways. "I don't think I want any sea-bathing at present."

"Well, at any rate, I wish you wouldn't stand on the tennis-ground watching in that critical fashion. Mrs. Clay says you make her so nervous she can't play a stroke. And as I always have to play against her it makes a very stupid game."

The Commissioner did not sneer at the idea of Mrs. Clay's nervousness, nor make any comment thereon of any kind. He only said, with a sign his wife did not understand :

"Very well."

But he was saying to himself : "The Fates are against me ; I must go and risk it." It was a risk he would scarcely have answered for even then.

And so it came about, that on the eleventh day after their afternoon at the Black Beacon, Oliver Drury came home from the office at four o'clock with a face set towards the shore, and, leaving Mrs. Drury and de Borny over their second cups of tea, took his way across the paddy-fields to the sandy cove close to the Black Beacon.

CHAPTER XII.

It was a very hot day, and it was perfectly ridiculous of him to set out so early. But Oliver Drury was testing himself : whether he could be within a few minutes of Isabel Reynolds and yet behave as though she were non-existent to him. The closer he got to the beach, indeed, the less he wanted to see her. Notwithstanding this, however, he took a good look round when he reached his destination, and even climbed one or two hillocks to get a better view. No one was in sight. So he had his bathe, dressed again and sat down by the sea. It was still absurdly early, only half-past five. No girl in her sane senses would dream of coming out at that hour. Yet it was quite cool there when the walk was once over, that is, pretty cool where the Commissioner was, undoubtedly very cool up in the hut of the Black Beacon. That was most decidedly the best place to be in now. Oliver Drury was at the bottom of the great mound of stones even before he had completed this train of reasoning in his mind.

The Black Beacon was very silent this afternoon. If anyone were up in it, that someone at least must be fast asleep. It would not do to wake any possible person suddenly. So Oliver Drury cleared his throat loudly three or four times. No response. Then he whistled a tune, but it was also in vain. And finally he called out :

“ Is there anyone up there ? ”

Still no answer. The Commissioner quickly climbed the rough stone steps. The hut was empty.

Empty, but not bare. A pair of gloves were lying in one corner—strange that they had escaped the fingers of the Chinese watchman. Mr. Drury saw them immediately. What is more, he took them up and looked at them. They were not so small as his wife's, perhaps, but they were none the less shapely for being large. At any rate, Mr. Drury thought so. He must have thought they were of some value likewise, for he put them, in a somewhat absent fashion, into his pocket.

It was certainly cool up in the hut, but it was a coolness that had something chilling about it. So Mr. Drury found after sitting on the window-ledge for about a quarter of an hour, looking out along the beach and across the sandy point. It was not a good thing to sit still in a damp place (it must be damp) after bathing. So Mr. Drury came down the steps, and made his way slowly home along the beach, and in front of the Custom House.

He was nearly as moody and silent as ever at dinner that evening, but Mrs. Drury put it all down to the liver, which could scarcely be expected to feel benefited immediately. Besides, she herself was in a particularly good humour, having had an especially successful afternoon. So when the boy had set down the coffee-cups and placed the cigar-box at Mr. Drury's elbow, Patricia began:

"It is really quite dreadful the way that Mrs. Reynolds goes on. I think, indeed I do, she ought not to be allowed to come on the tennis-ground."

"I don't think she often goes there," said Oliver in an indifferent tone. "I have never seen her there, at any rate." In reality he was burning to know if Isabel had been there, and secretly cursing his ill-luck at having missed her. What ages had passed since that afternoon! But Mrs. Drury was not giving him any time for thinking. She was saying:

"Well, she was there this afternoon, in the most indecently short dress and with her sleeves tucked up to her elbows. Like any house-maid. Not that I find fault so much with her dress, one can't expect everyone to have good taste, or who would choose some of those fearful patterns one gets sent to one from England?"

Mrs. Drury's coffee had been cooling rapidly all this time. It would not do to put off drinking it any longer. This accomplished, she took up her parable again, quite unconscious of the fact that her husband was listening intently. Strange that the Commissioner should be interested in the nature and material of a lady's dress! Yet in truth he was longing to ask if it was a certain white flannel, with broad red and blue stripes, which he had had such an opportunity of studying lately. Unfortunately for his curiosity, Mrs. Drury had passed on to another topic, which she most likely judged would be more entertaining to him.

"Then the Duc de Borny, he was there, too, gorgeous in brand-new clothes. Oliver, couldn't you give the poor young fellow some advice not to choose such very glaring checks? I assure you, the colours positively hurt my eyes."

Oliver Drury did not answer. The only thing he had taken in about de Borny had been, that he, too, was there. What had taken him to the tennis-ground that afternoon? The Commissioner had very little doubt but that it was the same thing that had kept him away all these days—Isabel. Yes, it was so after all, Isabel only cared for de Borny; and he, Oliver, was wasting his time and his heart in caring for her. It was only because she had no one better to speak to that she had been gracious to him at the Black Beacon. It was a humiliating, if not exasperating thought. The Commissioner felt it would be very easy to cure himself of his mad fancy for the Consul's wife now.

"Too hot in here now you've stopped the punkah, Oliver," said Mrs. Drury in a complaining voice. "The smell of your

cigar in this stuffy room makes me feel quite sick. Let us go out into the verandah."

So they went out, and Mrs. Drury lay down on one long chair, while Mr. Drury paced up and down, like a man who has not yet completed that day's allotted share of movement.

"Don't you want to hear about this afternoon, Oliver?" Mrs. Drury asked after a few minutes' silence. "I had such very comic things to tell you."

"Go on," said Oliver moodily. He could not think of anything comic in connection with the tennis-ground.

"Well, the Reynoldses came on first, Mrs. in that indecent gown I was telling you about—a sort of thing we used to call a blazer at home, with great staring red and blue stripes. She was evidently on the look-out for de Borny, for directly he came up she made towards him and put out the end of her bat for him to shake. He must have taken this as an insult, for he coloured up fearfully, and took no notice of her then. But she went on following him about the place, insisting on playing with him, and then behaving in such a queer fashion. I really think she must have been tipsy."

"My dear!" interrupted Mr. Drury hastily. "You shouldn't say such things of another lady."

"Lady, forsooth! Fine lady she. Nonsense, Oliver, you men are all alike; if a woman only has the impudence to show enough of her ankles, you think her sacred, far too good to be spoken about. Well, she's disgusted one man with her at any rate, that I'm positive of, and that man's the Duc de Borny."

"Eh?" said the Commissioner enquiringly. "How's that?"

"Why, no man likes to be made a fool of in public, and especially a Frenchman. You'll admit that. And Mrs. Reynolds did behave just like a mad woman. She was for ever hitting the balls in the Duc's face, or patting him on the back with her bat; and then, she never gave him a moment's peace. Mrs. Clay

said to me: 'She's a regular street-girl, a girl off the streets, Mrs. Drury.' And, upon my soul, I do believe she was right!"

"But what were the dreadful things Mrs. Reynolds did?" persisted Mr. Drury. "You haven't said anything very dreadful as yet."

"Well, Oliver," answered Mrs. Drury in a tone of the deepest reproach, "I did think you were a little more right-minded, even though you are not a religious man. Isn't that bad enough?" she cried out, suddenly waxing angry. "Isn't it disgraceful to keep on running after a man who is trying to get rid of you? Isn't it disgraceful to make faces at your husband before a whole lawn full of people, and contradict him flatly, and always call him 'Consul,' as though he were a Royal Highness? If you don't call all these things disgraceful, why, all I can say is, that you and I must have such very different eyes that we never can see anything alike!"

Mrs. Drury was regularly off on the war-path, and Oliver knew well it was of no use trying to stop her. But as he really wanted to hear everything about Mrs. Reynolds that he could possibly get out of his wife, especially as regarded this supposed fray with de Borny, he resorted to a mean expedient to get the conversation back into the original channel.

"It was very hot this afternoon," he began while Mrs. Drury was getting back her breath. "You don't think you have got any fever by playing? By the way, did you ask de Borny what had become of him these last few days?"

"No," Mrs. Drury answered. "I knew already, of course. His boy told my boy all about it. He was waiting for these new clothes to come over. Such fearful clothes! But still no one would go and laugh at them to his face, no one but your dear perfect Mrs. Reynolds would. The brazenfacedness of the woman, commenting on how they fitted, or didn't fit! Who on earth can have brought her up?"

"You are prejudiced, Patricia," said Mr. Drury. "De Borny very probably liked all that. They are very great friends."

"Friends, do you call it?" sneered Mrs. Drury. "Some people here call it by another name! I think she abuses Mr. Reynolds' indulgence most sinfully. But she and the Duc will be friends no more now, of that you may be certain. I don't believe they have been friends for a long time, and this afternoon she was trying to make it up. As if a quarrel, or an ill-feeling, could be got rid of by adding impudence to it! Truly, Mrs. Reynolds, you think too much of your round common face. But you don't take the women in with it, nor the men for long! You come out in your true colours at last!" There was so much of malicious triumph in Mrs. Drury's address to the absent Isabel, that the Commissioner felt quite horrified. He even began a mild expostulation, but this Mrs. Drury immediately drowned.

"No, Oliver, there's not a word to be said for her! She came here determined to ride it over everyone, and, mark my words, she'll leave it lower than the lowest tide-waiter's wife! I'm sorry for Mr. Reynolds, but he shouldn't have been such an idiot as to go and marry that woman! She has been washed in many waters, you may be sure. God preserve me from ever having anything to do with her in the next world; I am having my share of her here. She is a bad lot, depend on it, Oliver, a bad lot."

And Mrs. Drury got the last word by immediately going off to bed. The Commissioner lighted another cigar and lay down on the other long chair.

Not to think, but to enjoy the evening. Mrs. Drury's words, as far as they regarded Isabel herself, had not moved him in the slightest. He had heard the very same things said, over and over again, of most ladies of their acquaintance and had therefore come to attach very little significance to them. It was pretty certain to him that Mrs. Drury must go through a stage of

violent hatred before she could arrive at a state of blissful friendship with any pretty young woman. This stage of hatred was, unluckily, of longer duration than usual. Still, there was plenty of time before them, and the Commissioner knew, or at any rate thought, that he should often have the joy of sitting next to Mrs. Reynolds in his own house before the year was over.

The cigar was a good one, and Oliver Drury was, oddly enough, in a good humour, too. De Borny was out of the field, that was comforting, and there was nobody who had any idea of what Isabel Reynolds really was except himself. How he came to lay such a flattering unction to his soul it is simply impossible to say. Certainly it was purely imaginary. Isabel Reynolds had scarcely thought of him since that afternoon at the Black Beacon. All her attention had been taken up in trying to win back de Borny. When he had steadily refused all her invitations to tea or dinner, she had tried what her presence on the tennis-ground could do. Here, too, mainly by her own fault, she had failed, as it required no special acuteness to note. And this evening, while the Commissioner was half dozing over his cigar, seeing endless visions of red-and-blue-striped girls with broad felt hats and round blue eyes, Isabel was feeling too utterly crushed and sad, that is, too depressed to make an opposition or frame any clever answers to the long sermon Mr. Reynolds was reading her as to her behaviour on the tennis-ground that afternoon.

"Why don't you copy Mrs. Drury?" he wound up with, as he generally did. "She's such a perfect lady, you never can go wrong in being like her."

"Mrs. Drury!" repeated Isabel in a musing tone. Mr. Reynolds, thinking he had made an impression at last, went on with his lecture.

"Yes, Mrs. Drury. There's a woman, older than her husband, too, who can make herself just as pleasant to him

now as the day they were married. You never hear of a word between those two, certainly she would never show any disrespect to her husband in public. She takes more care of his position than that. And so ought you, my dear Isabel. Now this afternoon——”

“Oh, bother this afternoon!” cried Mrs. Reynolds impatiently. “How you do keep on jawing, Consul! What satisfaction can it be to you to prove that I’m so much worse than Mrs. Drury? It only shows that you can’t choose a wife as well as Mr. Drury did! Endlessly crying over spilt milk! Do have done with it.”

Mr. Reynolds was most deeply offended at this outburst and retired behind a book. Isabel, after banging about the drawing-room for a few minutes, walked out into the verandah and there—shade of Mrs. Drury!—lighted a cigarette.

This had the effect of soothing her nerves and making her feel penitent as regarded her husband. She came back into the drawing-room and put her arm round his neck, bending her face down to kiss him.

“Your lips are too cold,” said Mr. Reynolds with a shiver. “And I do wish you’d give up smoking! Now, you never smell any smoke about Mrs. Drury.”

CHAPTER XIII.

From that day forward the Consul's wife finally disappeared from the tennis-ground. She did not even come on to it after she had finished her walk. And the fashionables of Kantow did not regret her absence.

That is, de Borny excepted. Angry as he was with Mrs. Reynolds, and burning to be revenged on her, he did not see how she was to be punished except by his desertion of her. Of course that was punishment enough for any woman of de Borny's acquaintance. He had had one afternoon of triumph, that afternoon about which Mrs. Drury had carried home the news. But since then he had not seen Isabel, and, needless to remark, he had not enquired after her, at least directly. The victory was not worth the winning when the foe was not only not a captive, but, on the contrary, perfectly unconscious of the loss she had sustained.

Neither did the Commissioner come on to the tennis-ground any more. He went off to bathe at the sandy cove at half-past four every afternoon. Every afternoon, too, after his bath, he walked along the narrow point towards the Black Beacon. Not with any definite object in view, of course, but merely as an extra amount of exercise after the bath. And every afternoon, too, he was startled as he came within view of the doorway of the hut by a voice which called out :

"Mr. Drury! Mr. Drury! come up here."

It was curious how that voice invariably made him start. It seemed to set off an alarm inside him—what the missionaries would have called his conscience. He was always obliged to stand still for a minute, to let this alarm run itself down, and by that time the voice from the hut would call out again :

"Make haste! It is so cool up here, and I am so dull!"

Then the alarm was flung away to the four winds of heaven, and Mr. Drury was climbing up into the sheepfold, heedless of shepherds, natural guardians, watch-dogs or any such snares and pitfalls. And then—why, they had quite innocent talks about subjects in which all people are interested more or less: the next mail, the last one, the Chinese servants, the heat, what each had been doing that day—in short, all that comes under the head of common-place or every-day talk. Nothing more, at any rate, just now. Oliver Drury did not need to talk on abstract subjects with Isabel; the concrete were quite interesting enough for him. And as for Isabel, she had but very vague notions of all things beyond what she could see, or hear, or touch.

These talks were not long, not more than half-an-hour by day. Nor were they arranged beforehand, certainly not. When Mr. Drury said "Good-night," Isabel never dreamt of saying: "I shall see you again to-morrow?" That would have broken through the charm of uncertainty which was half the delight of these times on the Black Beacon. Mr. Drury, also, would have taken alarm had he fancied he was in any way expected to put in an appearance at a particular place and hour. Many days, indeed, the Black Beacon was empty when he walked below it; on others, again, he himself was too busy at the Custom House to be able to get there in time. And so there was the very slightest shade of an excuse for the lie he told himself every day in setting out for his bathing place, that he had no

chance of seeing Isabel Reynolds that afternoon at any rate, and that it was very seldom, and that by the purest accident, that he met her at all. It is to be feared that Mr. Drury actually came to believe this firmly himself. That is the only excuse that can be urged in his defence as the reason why he never said a word about these meetings to Mrs. Drury.

Yet the Commissioner's conscience was not so seared that he did not often feel a qualm in his wife's presence. When Mrs. Drury was in an amiable mood especially, poor Oliver felt very guilty. Luckily, or unluckily, this was an event of rare occurrence. Mrs. Drury had been out in China for four years since her last holiday, and the climate of Kantow was beginning to tell upon her. Then the new earth-works which the Chinese soldiers were continually turning up brought a great deal of malaria to the foreigners of the place, and Mrs. Drury was a great sufferer thereby. It is very difficult for a robust person to keep good-tempered during a Formosa June and July; it was simply impossible for Mrs. Drury. And what a contrast was she in this respect to Isabel Reynolds—young, strong, just out from England, happy in having her own way, not cursed with nerves, not troubled with feelings, with strong likes and dislikes, not refined, if you must have it so, but infinitely delightful as a companion for a short time. No, Mr. Drury would not have cared to have her as a permanency, he told himself. But just for a little, till he should get tired of her (or she of him). Oliver was experiencing what a Chinese philosopher had found out long before: "Men like best their own compositions and other men's wives!"

Perhaps it was curious, too, that the Consul, always on the look-out as he was for some disturbance to his peace of mind, especially in connection with his wife, should never have dreamed there was anything dangerous ahead when Isabel set off for her evening walk, or came back from it in such wonderfully high spirits. He had made up his mind that de Borny was the enemy

that he had to fear, at any rate while Angus Murray was safely out of the way, and he felt extremely secure so long as he kept the Frenchman in view. Though he had threatened Mrs. Reynolds with de Borny's revenge, he did not in reality think there was anything to be apprehended in this respect. Indeed, Mr. Reynolds, who could never imagine anyone's acting in a straightforward manner, put down all the coldness of the young man to some deep laid plot for getting Isabel away from her husband for ever. In this belief he always fancied he was being strengthened, and so became every day more convinced of the truth of it. Why did de Borny never ask after Mrs. Reynolds? Simply because he had no need to do so. Most likely he wrote her private chits, had secret meetings with her. Many a day did the poor Consul hurry home from the tennis-ground, to search his wife's writing-table—Isabel never locked up anything—to hold her blotting-paper up to the light in the vain hope of finding something compromising, or turn out the waste-paper basket for any tell-tale scraps. He was making quite a fine collection of odds and ends of letters; but though he studied and arranged them most carefully, they told him nothing. Yet Mr. Reynolds watched on, waiting for some great day to come which should reveal everything to him.

Strange, too, it was that neither Isabel nor Mr. Drury betrayed themselves at home. Both would hear items of news at their respective dinner-tables which were certainly connected in some way with their afternoon conversation. It was, perhaps, easy for Mr. Drury to feign ignorance of some particular discovery of the Consul's in regard to the Chinese or French proceedings which had been the burden of Isabel's talk that afternoon, but it was very difficult for Isabel to listen to Mr. Reynolds' eulogies on the Drury household when she was quite aware how very far the Commissioner was falling from grace. However, she was not altogether without experience in these affairs, and knew she had to make far more sure of Mr. Drury before she could venture on

what inevitably must come, and what would be a triumph to her when it did come, a revelation to the good people of Kantow of what had been going on for some time. What a scandal to Mrs. Drury! How Dagon would fall! Mrs. Clay and Mrs. de Lacy Smith would begin to tremble for their husbands. They would not dare to ignore or crush her any more, her reign in Kantow would be absolute and despotic. Only one thing was needed even now—a declaration on the part of Mr. Drury. But that was just what it was most difficult to get.

From all of which it must have been gathered that Isabel Reynolds was by no means as fond of Oliver Drury as he, poor man, had become all unconsciously of her. There was in reality only one person in the world that Isabel really loved, and that one was herself. In the matter of husbands, Mr. Reynolds was as good as any. He had a good position, a good income, was not young, and therefore not exacting, and, above all, let her have pretty much her own way. Perhaps he was not so amusing as Angus Murray or the Duc de Borny, but these would most likely not have been so amusing if she had been obliged to live with them always. Mr. Drury—yes, he was very nice indeed, but oh! so serious. Still, he was wanted to crush his wife in the end, and for the present he was agreeable. It never entered Isabel's head that the pleasure she felt in his society could grow into love.

One very hot afternoon in July, Isabel sat in the little hut waiting for Mr. Drury. She had nothing particular to say to him, the day had slipped by without anything to mark it. Mr. Reynolds had been busy all day writing a report of the completed earth-works to send up to Peking, for a steamer was lying in port with the blue-peter flying, and there were so many rumours of hostile ships hovering near that it was impossible to say how soon the Chinese predictions might be verified, and Kantow itself attacked. The very steamer now in port had brought the news that the French fleet, strong in ironclads and torpedo-boats, flashing blue lights and

chasing odd vessels, had been met with not so very far away. Close at hand, too, affairs were beginning to look serious. Some thirty miles away from Kantow, in the extreme north of Formosa, lay the harbour of Kelung, fine as regarded anchorage, valuable beyond a doubt on account of great quantities of coal, which was very easily obtainable, and therefore could be readily shipped by any chance comer. The Chinese had scorned the coal value of the place, but they were fully aware of its importance as a fortified station. Steep hills rose on all sides close to the water, and these now bristled with forts, loaded with huge European guns. Very few foreigners lived in Kelung, none in fact but a detachment from the Custom House at Kantow, who looked after the occasional ships that came in, and who considered themselves as martyrs banished from the Kantow metropolis. Mrs. Drury did her best to relieve their dulness by sending them over supplies of food—for the market of Kelung was even worse than that of Kantow—and a selection of literature, consisting mainly of odd magazines and newspapers, but notwithstanding the want of connection between the various stories, even these presents were very acceptable. And in winter the Commissioner and his wife had been accustomed to make at least one visit to this God-forsaken place, where, indeed, as Mrs. Drury was often heard to affirm, the only dish you could rely upon for any meal was oyster curry!

Be this as it may, the French squadron fresh from Tongking had not found it a very disagreeable station. One cruiser had been there for some time, and had departed not so very long before, leaving an ominous message that the inhabitants of Kelung might look for her appearance again. This message had greatly alarmed Mr. Reynolds, who had been informed of it soon after his return to Kantow, and indeed this news had formed the burden of all his warnings to the unbelieving community ever since. But as more than two months had elapsed since then,

and only an occasional French cruiser now put into Kelung for coal (although some said, also with a view to making a complete survey of the harbour), and as, moreover, both France and China persistently declared they were not at war, the foreigners again began to laugh at the Consul and at the Chinese, and the tea-season went on as merrily as ever.

Much as Mr. Reynolds' forebodings were scoffed at in Kantow, the Government was at any rate beginning to awake to the fact that there might be something in them. News came very slowly to Formosa, which was indeed in such matters at the mercy of every wind that blew. Still the news had been brought, by the same steamer that was now lying in port, that a British gunboat was to be sent across shortly. Some further pieces of news the captain likewise imparted to the Commissioner, together with a certain dispatch which, little as they could have guessed it, was to make a great change in the aspect of affairs at Kantow.

The dispatch, indeed, was a simple enough one. It merely intimated to the Commissioner of Customs at Kantow that the Duc de Borny, now an assistant at his port, was to be transferred to Shanghai upon the arrival of Mr. Thomas Humphrey Alison, lately transferred to Canton.

This was the piece of news that Mr. Drury was burning to impart to Isabel Reynolds as he walked toward his bathing cove. It was very good news to him. It would leave him the field most absolutely free, for the Commissioner had no fear of Tom, and further—but after all this was of minor importance—it would make the foreign community in Kantow much more safe if anything serious should happen. Personally, Mr. Drury was beginning to doubt that there would be anything to happen. Still, he had quite done his duty when he had reported to his chief in Peking that it was not prudent to have any Frenchman in the island of Formosa so long as

that nation was supposed to have any designs upon it. And was it not rather a reward to him for having so done his duty that this particular Frenchman should be the one man he would most have liked to get out of his way? At any rate, privately, de Borny was better at a distance, and it is always satisfactory, for a man like Oliver Drury was, to be able to feel a good turn has been done to other people while it has come to one's own self.

De Borny had of course been pleased likewise. He was sick to death of Kantow, where he had quarrelled with the only amusing woman, and longed to be in Shanghai. Unfortunately, he would have at least another week in the place, and a week now seemed an interminable period to this man, who had but a short time before resigned himself to passing at least two years in Kantow. A week, too, seemed a very long time to Mr. Drury, but he had his own ways of making time pass. And one way was to spend at least half-an-hour each day on the Black Beacon with Isabel Reynolds.

"Gracious goodness! You don't mean to say the Duc is going!" was Mrs. Reynolds' exclamation upon hearing the news. "Why, this place will really be duller than ever!"

It was a very natural remark, but Oliver Drury felt somewhat piqued by it.

"I don't think de Borny's being in the place or out of it need make much difference to you," he said in a mortified tone. "You and he have not been such particular friends lately."

"No," Isabel said, musingly. Then she added, in a half-defiant tone: "But we can always become so again, if we like!"

To which feeler, for it was nothing else, Mr. Drury made no answer. He had come to the Black Beacon in such a particularly happy mood, and lo! how his sweet was turning to bitterness. Why did Mrs. Reynolds take the news in this way? Why was she sorry de Borny was going? Mr. Drury

was as uncertain as he could be about the answers to these questions. And the uncertainty was something like torture to him.

So he did the wisest thing in the world, kept silence until Isabel had repented. He had learned to be silent during stormy scenes with Mrs. Drury, and his lessons were coming in useful now. For at the end of five minutes a voice, very quiet, said to him :

"You know I don't care one bit whether the Duc goes or stays. I hate him!"

And then Mr. Drury turned round, and saw two very round blue eyes staring hard at him, with just a shadow of a wicked twinkle lurking in them. Isabel was sitting on her favourite window-ledge, and Mr. Drury had nothing to do but to sit down on his doorstep and gaze into her face. He was beginning to know the face by heart, to be able to shut his eyes at any moment and call it up before his mind, always framed in the windowless window of the little hut, with a background of waves and sky. And yet Mr. Drury told himself every day of his life that he cared no more about Mrs. Reynolds than he did about Mrs. de Lacy Smith !

"You know," Isabel was saying, "that I don't care to talk to anyone in Kantow half as much as to you."

Which was true. Only she had not many people to choose among.

"Mrs. Reynolds, you make me very happy." The words had slipped out before he knew them. Mrs. Drury was out of sight and mind, Oliver was only conscious of one world to him, the world of the hut, and one figure, that of Isabel Reynolds. And yet there must have been something beyond, something which kept him where he was, that restrained him from covering that face with kisses, from saying all the soft things that kept on crowding into his mind. It was Isabel who said them all.

CHAPTER XIV.

"We have been friends for a long time now," she went on, apparently unconscious of Mr. Drury's words. "I hope nothing could turn you easily against me now."

"Nothing, nothing," Oliver Drury repeated.

"You see," Isabel continued, turning her head slightly away, as though she was addressing the sea and the sky outside, "we are very luckily placed for being great friends. Both of us are married, so how can anybody object to it? Girls and bachelors couldn't be. The girls are always supposed to have some plot in their heads for getting married. Now, we are married; that part's all finished; so we can be friends and talk quite freely together. You understand, don't you, and agree?"

"Yes," said Mr. Drury, a trifle dubiously. Isabel's speech had brought back to his remembrance the outside world, by which he understood mainly his own wife. Would she approve of this great friendship? And could he contract any friendships without her approval?

"I have been wanting to say this to you for a long time," Isabel went on. "I never had the courage to begin it before. But now we quite understand each other—we do, don't we?—I shall begin to talk to you as though you were a brother of mine. I do want that kind of friend so much; you will be it, won't you?"

Oliver Drury did not know how he answered this. He must

have said something, perhaps a great many things, for he felt so profoundly, securely happy that he was fit for any brotherly folly. He had no idea of where he was, scarcely of who he was, how the time was passing or of whither he was going, mentally or physically. Only the two were telling each other the truth, of that he felt certain, that they were made to be friends, that nobody else pleased them so much as each other, and, best of all, that their friendship would be eternally the same, since the conditions of their lives most fortunately not only prevented them from being otherwise, but prevented evil-minded persons from imagining there was any motive in their fellowship.

It was Isabel who gave the signal for starting homewards this afternoon. The Commissioner would never have given it, or at any rate would have put it off to a dangerous time, but Mrs. Reynolds was ready to move long before he was. In truth, now that she had settled this eternal friendship with Mr. Drury, she did not know exactly what to do with it. It had just flashed across her mind, the minute after she had spoken the decisive words, that these were some of the things best left unsaid. There was no danger of his falling in love with her, nor of her doing so with him, forsooth! That was out of the question, since they were both married. But in spite of the confident way in which she had asserted this fact to Mr. Drury, there kept on lurking in her mind a tiny feeling of uneasiness. For to her own great astonishment, as she went over the conversation on her way home, she found that she had neither spoken of Mrs. Drury, nor tried to inflame that lady's husband against her, which last had been the sole purpose for which originally she had tried to make herself agreeable to Mr. Drury.

No, she did not care much what became of Mrs. Drury now. All she wanted was to have Oliver Drury as her friend and confidant. If Mrs. Drury left her as free as she was at present to enjoy the Commissioner's society, why, she would not be so

very objectionable after all. And undoubtedly she was very clever.

Strange was it that Isabel did not resent Mrs. Drury's being so clever this evening. Usually the thought irritated her absurdly. She was beginning to lose her faith in the power clever women have over the other sex.

Oliver Drury, of course, walked home another way. Not as a precaution, certainly, but because it was the shortest path to his house. He, too, had no qualms. How could he have them, when they had just agreed that they would be the greatest friends, and that it was most lucky, indeed, for had not Mr. Reynolds married Isabel, Oliver Drury would most probably never have known her. And had he never known her——

That would have been a loss, certainly. But here was his own gate, and Mrs. Drury and the Duc de Borny were standing in the verandah, talking earnestly. They did not seem particularly pleased when the Commissioner appeared, or rather he fancied they were not. Perhaps he had turned suspicious of others, now that others had begun to have reason to be suspicious of him.

"Good-night. Thank you," said Mrs. Drury with a bright smile to the young Frenchman, who forthwith took his leave.

"You are rather late to-night, Oliver," she said, taking hold of her husband's arm. "The Duc de Borny walked home with me, and we have been talking quite a quarter of an hour. What made you so late?"

"Nothing, nothing I know of," answered the Commissioner hastily, in some confusion. Luckily, Mrs. Drury was too intent on other things to notice Mr. Drury's manner.

"The Duc is going away, he tells me, Oliver."

"Yes. I got the despatch this afternoon. He goes to Shanghai, and Tom Alison comes back here."

"I am going to look after Mr. Alison more carefully this time," said Mrs. Drury significantly.

"He won't thank you for that," said Mr. Drury, secretly pleased at the turn the conversation was taking. "Are you going to correct his morals, my dear?"

This tone of mild banter was one especially provoking in general to Mrs. Drury, but she did not somehow or other seem to mind it this evening. She made a pause in the walk they were taking along the verandah in front of the door, and then said:

"I will explain everything to you after dinner. I have a very important piece of news to tell you."

"Let me hear it now," Mr. Drury called out, but his wife had disappeared. And as it was of no use following and trying to find this news out before she was ready to impart it, Mr. Drury took a few more turns up and down the verandah, thinking of his new little friend, and then went in and got ready for dinner.

But he was not destined to finish that meal in peace. The fish had scarcely been removed when a loud ring at the door-bell resounded through the house.

"What is the matter?" cried Mrs. Drury in some concern. For the bell was never heard in this house, and was, in fact, generally supposed to be unpullable, a result of frequent earthquakes and lightning flashes. The last trump for the Day of Judgment could scarcely be more alarming.

Mr. Drury was not nervous. But he got pale, though from scarcely the same cause as his wife, when the China boy ushered in none other than the Consul himself!

Mr. Reynolds was in such a state of nervous excitement that he did not notice the utterly confounded, not to say aghast countenance of Mr. Drury. Neither did Mrs. Drury, whose eyes were fixed in astonishment on the Consul's face.

"May I have a few minutes' private conversation with you, Drury?"

Mr. Drury rose without quite knowing what he was doing, utterly overwhelmed in mind in anticipation of the storm he felt sure was about to burst on his head. Still, it was considerate of Mr. Reynolds not to accuse him before his wife. Oliver Drury did not want to be humiliated at his own dinner-table.

He led the way into the drawing-room, where a coolie was hastily lighting a lamp. This was a process the master of the house would fain have prolonged, but Mr. Reynolds was in a hurry.

"Can do, can do," he said testily. And the astonished domestic departed forthwith.

"Drury, it has come at last!" he said in a dramatic tone, standing hat in hand in the middle of the floor. "I knew it would! I told you so long ago!"

"What?" asked Mr. Drury, thinking it well to feign ignorance as long as he could.

"*They* have come. The French are in Kelung!"

Serious as this news undoubtedly was, Oliver Drury could feel nothing but the most intense relief. He would not have minded at that particular instant if Mr. Reynolds had told him ten thousand Frenchmen were about to blockade his house. And in his immense relief the Commissioner actually smiled in the Consul's face.

"Do you understand?" cried Mr. Reynolds, horrified at the smile. "Do you know six or seven French cruisers, and I don't know how many torpedo boats, are within thirty miles of you? Don't you see that we may be all dead men to-morrow?"

"I do, indeed," answered Mr. Drury, who during this outburst had had time to control his features. "It is very serious indeed. Did you think I was joking or smiling about it? Not at all, my dear sir, not at all. But don't you think the danger is not quite so pressing? What do you think we can do this evening, for example?"

Mr. Drury was thinking of a curly cropped head which was being left alone and dinnerless. If he had been Mr. Reynolds, he would never have left that head alone. No, not even to walk down on the beach and to the Black Beacon.

"I must do something," said Mr. Reynolds nervously, beginning to walk up and down the room. "The safety of the community is in my hands. I must fetch the foreigners away from Kelung. It must be done to-night."

"Neither will thank you for the trouble," said Mr. Drury, who was perfectly master of himself once more. "How do you know the report is true? Whose story are you going by?"

For answer Mr. Reynolds handed him a letter from one of the foreigners at Kelung, which was certainly alarming enough, even to the sceptical Mr. Drury.

"Yes," he said slowly, folding it up carefully and handing it back. "Affairs are bad there. I will go over to-morrow and find out about it myself."

"I will go. It is my duty!" cried Mr. Reynolds.

"No. You must look after the community here and at Banca. Clay will see about the office here. Unfortunately, you can't be split into two pieces, Consul, and it is more important for you to be here than in Kelung. You have to look after the ladies, remember!"

"The ladies!" repeated Mr. Reynolds. "They will be a great care to us if the French come round here. We must send them over to Amoy."

"Time to think about that when they come," said Mr. Drury quickly. "I will go to Kelung to-morrow. Now go back to your dinner."

He was in such a hurry to get Mr. Reynolds back to his own house that he utterly forgot to offer him the traditional glass of wine. The Consul did not notice the omission, but

Mrs. Drury did. The wine was standing waiting for the departed one when Mr. Drury came back into the dining-room.

"Where is the Consul?" she asked in surprise.

"Gone," answered Mr. Drury. And he settled down to his dinner again as though nothing had happened.

"Didn't you offer him a glass of wine, Oliver?"

"No, why should I keep him away from his dinner any longer?"

Mrs. Drury was amazed, but wisely gave her husband a rest from her tongue while he was still hungry. And then it was he who spoke first.

"I am going over to Kelung to-morrow, Patricia."

"Very foolish of you. It is at least ten degrees hotter there than here, and you are sure to get fever."

"The French have got a lot of ships there, and are going to bombard the forts. I must fetch away the foreigners from there," answered Mr. Drury, attacking a dish of stewed fruit.

"You are spilling the juice on the clean cloth, Oliver!" was the reply in an annoyed tone. "Oh, what did you say? The French? Are they coming here? What will happen? Hadn't I better go away? I hate guns and soldiers and fighting!"

"We shall see," said the Commissioner airily. "There will be plenty of time to decide when I come back. At present you will be quite safe in Mr. Reynolds' care."

"Mr. Reynolds' care, forsooth!" cried Mrs. Drury. "A nice sort of a broken reed to trust to! Why, he'd come and hide behind me, I expect. And as for his wife—oh, that reminds me, Oliver, of what I was going to tell you about her. Do you know——"

"I haven't time to listen to any stories now," interrupted the Commissioner, rising hastily. "I must go and get my things ready for Kelung. I shall start to-morrow morning at five."

To such devices was Oliver Drury put to keep the name of Isabel Reynolds out of his wife's lips.

CHAPTER XV.

Mr. Drury went to Kelung and came back again. And the French stormed the place, as they had threatened to do, and were driven back again and again to their ships with heavy loss, to their most utter astonishment. The foreigners escaped to Kantow in a steam launch and a British gunboat, all but one pilot, who sold himself to the French, and doubtless reaped his reward. Those were evil days for both the French and Chinese, those days when the French held Kelung.

And all this time more French ships had sailed up the Min River, on the way to Foochow, burning to attack and destroy the great Chinese arsenal at Pagoda Anchorage. There the ships lay, with the guns run out, the decks cleared for action, and the gunners standing waiting by their guns. Waiting for the signal to come from France that the time was finished for inaction, but waiting long weeks in vain.

And all this time the tea-merchants of Banca were trembling in their canvas shoes (they all wore them during the hot weather, not to speak of pyjamas) at Kantow, and their *taipans* in Amoy and Foochow were writing furious letters asking why they were not going on with their business. All this time the little British gunboat was lying in the river below the Consulate, and Mr. Reynolds was writing report after report and issuing circular after circular from the old Red Fort. And Mrs. Reynolds was

taking her daily walks to the Black Beacon, while Mr. Drury had not discontinued his bathes.

And the Duc de Borny had fled, or, rather, made a masterly retreat. The Consul could breathe freely now. Tom Alison might consider himself a lady-killer, but he was not dangerous. He was too cautious a Scotchman to commit himself in any way. As for Angus Murray, he was so passionately fond of lawn-tennis that he could think and speak of nothing else just now. In any case, Mr. Reynolds was not afraid of him. For had he not given Isabel up to the Consul in the first instance?

So Mr. Reynolds was perfectly at rest concerning his domestic affairs, and gave himself up completely to fussing about the dangers around. He wearied the mandarins with letters and messages, kept his Chinese clerks running up and down the hill to the Custom House, went up to Banca on the slightest excuse, threatened immediate imprisonment to any British subject found outside the boundary of the treaty port, and finally began to prepare an elaborate memorial to the Foreign Office on this and every subject. Mr. de Lacy Smith, who was a most arrant coward, suddenly became his bosom friend and rushed up to the Red Fort with every rumour that was afloat. Then Mr. Reynolds would go across the oleander path to his house to pour all his news into the ears of his wife, never heeding how little attention she paid to his words. Had Isabel not been there, he would most probably have told it all to his dog.

It was an infinite relief to Isabel to get out of this atmosphere—thick with smoke from guns to be fired in the future, bristling with bayonets that as yet were rusty, red with blood that was to be shed—to get away from all this, even though it was through burning sun and past places where Chinese braves were hurrying on fortifications, to the cool hut on the Black Beacon. There might be earth-works close behind her and ambushes to the right and left, that did not matter in the least, for in the hut she was

certain of a time of perfect enjoyment, with an adorer sitting in the doorway opposite her, a friend ready to soothe her, a brother to comfort and pet her. Very brotherly Oliver Drury had become, even to the length of a brother's kiss. They were sliding rapidly into lovers almost without being conscious of it. Nevertheless Oliver Drury seemed almost paternal towards her, and Isabel was more childish with him than she was ever wont to be with her own husband. It was the side of her nature the Commissioner liked best, the assumption of the naughty, spoiled child. For with Isabel as his child he could quite well associate Mrs. Drury as his wife. The two need not clash, and Oliver's kisses to Mrs. Reynolds were no more unlawful than his kisses to one of his own nieces would be.

So at least Oliver Drury kept on telling himself. He had to remind himself of all this very often, for, in spite of the fair show he could make in the matter, his conscience was not quite at ease. That is, he had to remind himself of one particular scene with his wife to justify himself in his behaviour towards her and towards Isabel.

It had happened one night soon after he came back from Kelung, one night in August, a day or so after de Borny had left. He had come back as usual from his golden time at the Black Beacon, with Isabel's voice, so softly modulated that no one in Kantow would have recognised it, ringing in his ears, and one very sweet spot on his face, where Isabel had just given him her first sister's kiss. And he found Mrs. Drury terribly on the war-path. The boy had got fever, and Mr. Drury had locked up the quinine. The soup was uneatable, simply Worcester sauce and hot water. The chickens were tough, the pudding too atrocious. And when the unfortunate meal was over she planted herself on a lean-back chair in the verandah and began her attack.

"Oliver, do you know they say you admire that Mrs. Reynolds very much?"

Mr. Drury felt a sudden lump rise up somewhere in his body, which seemed to have the most curious effect over his voice. He could scarcely articulate his answer.

"Who are the they, Patricia?"

"It doesn't matter," answered Mrs. Drury testily. "But it isn't a good report to go about of you. What have you been saying about her? Whom have you been speaking to?"

As Mrs. Drury was evidently entirely on the wrong track, her husband felt justified in feigning anger at her questions.

"I don't choose to be catechised and criticised, Patricia. And if you had done as you ought to have done, you would never have allowed people to make such remarks about me."

What a short memory did Mr. Drury possess! But perhaps Isabel was not one of the "people" when she had given Oliver Drury her candid opinion of his wife that very afternoon. Or perhaps the sisterly kiss had had a Lethe-like effect on him, and wiped out remembrance of her former words.

"You must be criticised, if you stand gazing at her all one evening, like a stuck pig! Such a creature, too, painted-up and powdered, with short petticoats and great hands and feet! You could tell what she was by only looking at her. Everyone agrees on that now!"

"I thought you couldn't find out who she was," said Mr. Drury, trying to hide with a sneer the concern he really felt at her words. What was Mrs. Drury driving at?

"Ah, but I have found out who she was, the low hussy!" cried Mrs. Drury, entirely forgetful of her own dignity. "Of course it had to come out in the end. A ballet dancer, who used to exhibit herself in pink tights, and came from what gutter no one can ever tell, and led such a life, most likely, as would make any modest woman blush. Who knows whether she is married now, as Mrs. Clay said? Such a creature to introduce to us! Why, even Mrs. de Lacy Smith, vulgar as she is, says——"

But Mr. Drury had heard enough. In a voice terrible indeed, and utterly unheard before by his wife, he thundered forth :

"Who told you such a damned pack of lies?"

The words offended Mrs. Drury's sense of propriety, the voice frightened her. She said, in a somewhat sulky tone :

"There's nothing that concerns you personally, Oliver, in all this, that you need be so ill-tempered about it."

"No, no," answered the Commissioner, more eagerly than was quite prudent. "Only I do so detest this tittle-tattling and scandal-mongering among you women. Who told you this story? Mrs. Clay or Mrs. de Lacy Smith?"

"Neither of them, no one in the place at all. But someone who had it on the very best authority, from the woman herself! What do you think of *that*, now?"

Mrs. Drury was completely triumphant. Her husband had not a word to say. To tell the truth, he was too utterly dumbfounded to speak for a few instants.

"Patricia," he said at length, in a solemn tone, "Who told you this? You must tell me at once."

"I shan't tell you if you don't promise me not to repeat the name!"

"Am I a woman?" sneered Mr. Drury. "Do I generally repeat things? Why, I don't tell you even——"

And there he stopped. For a host of things that he had not told his wife, and yet ought to have told her, rose up before him. Mr. Drury was certainly not a man to read Mrs. Drury a lecture on the subject.

"It was de Borny," said Mrs. Drury half sulkily. "Why, she told him herself all about it, in the days when they were far more together than they ought to have been"—here Mrs. Drury paused significantly—"and showed him pictures of herself doing, I don't know what, most likely dancing on the tight-rope, or standing on her head, or some of those elegant attitudes you men

admire! I was perfectly ashamed of the way you stood and stared at her on that Queen's Birthday, Oliver. You ought to remember she's not exhibiting now!"

"And did de Borny, or did you, tell the other women all these lies?"

"Gently, my dear Oliver, gently. What makes you so excited about it all? I was told, and the others—ladies, please, not women, we have to distinguish between the two here—well, I told them. And quite right of me, too! I should have been guilty of a very wrong action if I had not warned them in time. I only did my duty."

"Exactly," said the Commissioner. His temper did not admit of his uttering another word. He simply walked into the house, through it, and out again into the path which led to his gate.

The gate was open, and he passed through it. Where he was going he scarcely knew, till he found himself at the great brown Consulate gate. And then he pulled himself together, turned sharp round and went back again to his own house.

Mrs. Drury was indoors, getting ready for bed. But though she stayed awake quite half an hour, her husband did not come inside. She could hear him now, tramping up and down the verandah in a restless, uncomfortable way. He had not taken her news quite as calmly as he ought to have done.

"I don't like it," Mrs. Drury said to herself, as she finally settled down for the night. "And is it possible that de Borny had some motive after all for saying he thought he had better warn me about that woman? Can she be laying her snares for Oliver?" The thought puzzled her for a few minutes. But then the bed was so comfortable, and she was so sleepy, that her thoughts gradually melted into dreams, and the dreams into profound slumbers, from which not even the tossing about of Mr. Drury awakened her.

However, when she awoke in the morning, it was with an uncomfortable sensation of something wrong. She at first imagined she had fever, but the thermometer dispelled that little illusion. Mr. Drury had entirely recovered his good temper, although he could not control his desire to avoid her eye. He had a great pressure of work in the Custom House, and went off early. And Mrs. Drury settled down to a regular morning's work of airing winter clothes, interspersed with raids of hot water on various colonies of white ants that had taken up their habitation too close to the house.

These occupations, however, leave one plenty of opportunity for thinking. And Mrs. Drury was thinking over last night's talk, and trying to make out what had been the cause of her husband's behaviour. Which was indeed a very difficult problem for her to solve.

The conclusion she arrived at, of course all in a moment, while she was washing her hands for tiffin, was this: That she would keep a good watch over Mrs. Reynolds, and find out if she tried to hold any communication with her husband. Oliver Drury must be protected against the wiles of this vicious woman.

She might drag his name into anything—Mrs. Drury loved general terms and wide statements. And he, Oliver Drury, he would be too much of a gentleman to repel her as she ought to be repelled.

Looking upon the Commissioner, then, as an innocent lamb for whom snares were being laid, Mrs. Drury felt she must treat him with extra kindness and consideration. Perhaps it might be as well, also, to warn Mr. Reynolds about his wife. In fact, the more Mrs. Drury thought of it, the more convinced she became that this was absolutely her duty.

An awkward duty, though, even for a Mrs. Drury. Certainly Mr. Reynolds was not a man to resent disagreeable remarks about his wife, at least, probably. But it would be much better if some

man spoke to him—a Mr. Drury, in short. Only, what man was there on the face of the globe who would report to another man of the designs that man's wife had upon him? It was altogether preposterous.

And yet Mrs. Drury could see no other way out of the difficulty. So she waited a favourable opportunity of instructing Mr. Drury in the way he should go.

The opportunity came, but lo and behold! Mr. Drury utterly refused to listen to the proposal. Of course he was perfectly right, and could easily have convinced Mrs. Drury that he was so. But he did not try to convince her. He was too utterly angry at the bare idea of accusing Mrs. Reynolds, his little Isabel, to her husband, to think of any prudent arguments. So they had a heated discussion, in consequence of which Mrs. Drury sulked for several days and the Commissioner did not care in the least. And so, by his own foolish conduct at home, he brought it about that Mrs. Drury began to keep her eyes open as to his own movements also.

So August slipped away, while Mrs. Drury was turning over in her mind how she could set a watch on Isabel Reynolds, whom she now never saw, and over her own husband, of whom she saw a good deal. It slipped away, too, before she had said anything to Mr. Reynolds, who now spent most of his time in the Chinese Governor's *yamên*, and only appeared on the tennis-ground for mysterious confidences to, and walks with, Mr. de Lacy Smith. And August passed, too, without Oliver Drury's telling Isabel Reynolds that the Frenchman had betrayed her secret, and that everyone in Kantow knew more about her past life than she did herself.

CHAPTER XVI.

It was strange, indeed, that no one in Kantow ever met the two lovers together, no one ever suspected the meetings at the Black Beacon. Had de Borny remained in the place, he would undoubtedly have ferreted out the secret. But with the selfishness of an isolated community each one cared only for his own personal amusement or comfort, and the amusement centred entirely round the tennis-ground. And, good cause as Mrs. Drury was beginning to assure herself she possessed for suspecting Mrs. Reynolds, she could scarcely accuse her husband without having a reflection cast upon herself. And a reflection on herself meant a loss in social position never to be made up for.

So matters were simmering and fermenting below a fair surface in the Drury household all that August. Mrs. Drury was always on the look-out for a weak spot on which to make her attack. And looking out made her, quite unconsciously, extra irritated against and irritating to the Commissioner, who therefore enjoyed more than ever his stolen times at the Black Beacon.

With the last days of August, however, those times came to an end. For the French cruisers, having demolished the Kelung forts, and landed large bodies of men there to keep the place against the Chinese attacks, suddenly appeared, at first singly, and then in twos and threes, off the mouth of the Kantow river, in full sight of the foreigners, of the Chinese, and of the earth-works.

And then the mandarins threw off all their assumed indifference, and sent a message informing the British Consul that they were about to barricade the river and lay it with torpedoes.

In great alarm Mr. Reynolds summoned a meeting of the tea-merchants, missionaries and Customs officials of Kantow. The Red Fort was crowded with foreigners, who openly owned to being most thoroughly scared. Among the crowd, in fact, there was only one man who appeared calm. Extraordinary as it may sound, it was not the Consul himself. It was the Commissioner.

In a few words, Mr. Reynolds explained the situation, and asked for opinions.

Then a confused murmur arose, increased, and suddenly ceased. Each one had spoken, but no one had heard.

"It is my opinion," said Mr. Reynolds irrepressibly, "that you are all a set of cowards!"

At this sudden attack the murmur again arose, but again subsided. Mr. Reynolds was speaking once more.

"I say, you, for though I don't like the position myself, yet I have been prepared for it for many months. Which you all have not been!"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. de Lacy Smith impatiently, "that's all right. But what are we going to do now?"

"Do now? Do you ask me, who have been warning you all along? It's too late to do anything now, except run away. And you've got a chance to do that to-day. There is the *Taiwan* lying in the river; she goes out to-night, our last steamer, and the torpedoes are laid to-morrow. Run away, go to Amoy, to Shanghai, where you like. I shall stay here to the last!"

"You're obliged to," muttered Mr. de Lacy Smith under his breath to Mr. Drury. "Or you'd be the first to run away yourself. Was there ever a greater coward than that man? And to taunt us with it! I'll not stand it, by Jove, I won't!"

"Can do, can do," said the Commissioner soothingly. "He's excited, has lost his head a little. Let me speak to him."

And Mr. Drury stepped forward from the crowd and turned to Mr. Reynolds, who had got behind the office-table and was standing in a defensive attitude.

"Mr. Consul," he said, very slowly, and the murmur of voices behind him died away, "we are very much obliged to you for calling us together. Some of us, you and I for example, cannot get away if we would, our office keeps us here. Then we have the gunboat to protect us. Others of us do not want to go, we have our hongs to look after, and see that they don't get looted, as has just happened at Pagoda Anchorage. But there are some people we all want to put in safety—the ladies."

"Yes, yes!" cried three or four voices. Mr. Reynolds gazed in astonishment at Mr. Drury. He had evidently contemplated an entire exodus of the community, with himself left behind to be a solitary martyr. It was utterly a new light to him that others might not be able to run away any more than he was able.

"I can't go!" "Nor I!" "Nor I!" sounded from all parts of the room. The missionaries alone kept silence.

"Mr. Clay," said Mr. Drury, "you have a wife and family. I cannot give you leave to go yourself, but you had better send them off to-night."

"I will," answered Mr. Clay. And all the husbands agreed that their wives, and children, if they had any, should be put on board the *Taiwan* and sent away from the danger.

"I have saved Isabel's life at any rate," thought Mr. Drury, as he took his way homewards. "And if I am killed—and of course there's a chance of it—poor Patricia will have plenty of money, and needn't stay in China any longer. I should like her to be happy after all."

With which virtuous sentiment he opened the house door and called his wife's name in a cheerful voice.

"Here!" answered a rather unsteady voice, and Mrs. Drury, with a face somewhat redder than usual, emerged from her husband's dressing-room.

"What were you doing there, Patricia?"

"Only putting away some of your winter clothes."

"Hum!" said Mr. Drury in a rather dubious tone. There were one or two things about his dressing-room he did not at all want to be looked over—an old envelope with a dark lock of hair in it which must have fallen down from his dressing-table that morning, since he had searched for it in vain, a few pencil notes scribbled on the back of an old permit, not all in his own handwriting, about certain things he had been discussing at the Black Beacon last day, not to speak of an old glove which had lain folded away among his pocket handkerchiefs for some months now. No wonder Mr. Drury particularly disliked having his dressing-room cleaned out.

"I have something to say to you, Patricia," he said somewhat sharply. "You are to get ready to go in the *Taiwan* this afternoon to Amoy."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Drury in great amazement.

"Because there are three French cruisers outside, and they are going to barricade the river and lay it with torpedoes. We are sending away all the ladies and children."

"All?" asked Mrs. Drury searchingly. Mr. Drury did not like the question.

"Yes, all," he repeated. "Who do you think would be left behind?"

"I didn't know," said Mrs. Drury, removing her eyes from his face. "Well, I'll think about it. Come to tiffin now."

"Thinking won't help you," called out Oliver Drury from his dressing-room. But he was not sure that Mrs. Drury heard him.

To his utter astonishment, however, not to say alarm, Mr. Drury left his wife still "thinking" when he went back to his office after tiffin. Alarm, because he began to be afraid she was making up her mind not to go, which would be exceedingly awkward for him. A man can rough so many things that a woman cannot.

And without doubt there was a great deal of roughing before the Kantow community. The Chinese were determined to fight to the death, the French had not shown themselves merciful hitherto. The poor neutrals were pretty sure to suffer from both parties, to be either shelled by the French or looted by the Chinese. And Mr. Reynolds as their Consul made them doubly unsafe. Who among them could keep him straight, save Mr. Drury himself? And Mr. Drury felt ashamed to censure and guide the man whom he had wronged and was wronging every day.

For there was no denying it, Mr. Drury had behaved badly to Mr. Reynolds. Badly, especially, because Mr. Reynolds was too feeble to resent it. And it was after all not such a bad thing that the Commissioner could atone for his wrong by sending Isabel Reynolds far away from him.

Mr. Drury sat in his office, busily signing papers and getting through work. Mr. Clay was at home packing up his wife and children, so the Commissioner and Tom Alison were doubly busy. A slight coldness was growing up gradually between these two, the cause of which was undoubtedly Mr. Drury himself. He resented, in a way utterly ridiculous, the liberty Tom possessed of tiffing or dining at the Consulate, a liberty which he himself could not venture on, and which de Borny had wilfully thrown away. It was absurd, certainly, but nevertheless true, that Mr. Drury was jealous of the young man. But then this intercourse the Commissioner carried on with Mrs. Reynolds had as much a bad effect on his character as a good.

At four o'clock the *Taiwan* cleared, and lay at the buoy in the river only waiting for the tide to rise. It was rising now, but

slowly, as Mr. Drury noted in going past the high-water mark. He lingered a little up the Consulate hill and took more than one look over the gate as he got on to higher ground. No one was visible. Isabel was doubtless busy packing.

Well, at any rate, he would see her on board the *Taiwan*, though they would not be able to say a word to each other, and it might be the last time they looked upon each other on earth. But they could write, after all. Mr. Drury had a little note, the first he had written to her, tucked away in his waistcoat pocket. And the Commissioner felt life would not be so utterly unendurable to him with the chance of a letter from Isabel now and then.

He had not realised yet what the blockade would be to him in this respect, how very doubtful it was that he would ever get a letter from her, even if she wrote. No, the danger he feared for her if she stayed in Kanton was a great and real one: death. Anything that could happen to either of them was better than that.

"Oliver!" Mrs. Drury's voice sounded calm and determined from the drawing-room.

"Yes! Are you ready?" Mr. Drury called back, instinctively putting his hand to his waistcoat pocket to hear the reassuring crackling of paper.

"I am not going."

Mr. Drury was standing in the doorway by this time.

"Nonsense," he answered angrily. "You must go. Make haste and pack up. I'll help you."

"I am not going," Mrs. Drury answered again. "I have quite made up my mind. I shall be perfectly safe here."

"But you will make everyone else unsafe!" cried Mr. Drury, losing his temper. "What folly this is, Patricia! How can you be the only woman in the place when probably we shall all have to live together in one room, and may have everything we possess taken from us? You ought to have packed up as many things as you could, to save them with you. I tell you, you must go."

"All the women are *not* going," answered Mrs. Drury, steadily. "And as long as there is a woman left to stick to her husband here, I will stay. For I do care about you, Oliver," she said, suddenly changing her tone. "And if any harm came to you while I was away I should never forgive myself."

"Stuff!" said the Commissioner, hardening his heart in a brutal way, for he felt such a wave of shame come over him that he could almost have confessed everything to Mrs. Drury, there on the spot. "You will endanger all our lives, and I particularly wish you to go."

Mrs. Drury was deeply mortified, not to say hurt, by the way her advances had been received. But she was only the more determined to stay.

"I have been to see Mr. Reynolds," she said defiantly. "And he tells me there is no need for me to go. His wife is not going either."

"Oh!"

The Commissioner said no more, but turned on his heel and went into his dressing-room. But Mrs. Drury, as she heard the door close behind him, forgot herself so far as to shake her fist in his direction and mutter:

"You particularly wish me to go, do you? As long as that woman's in the place you'll never get me to stir!"

And the *Taiwan* sailed that night with two empty cabins. They were those which had been allotted to Mrs. Drury and to Mrs. Reynolds.

Moreover, Mrs. Drury wondered why there were so many blackened fragments of paper in her husband's candlestick next morning. But she could make nothing out of the fragments, which were even blacker than a certain lock of hair she had not yet had the opportunity of matching.

CHAPTER XVII.

There was as complete a blockade of Kantow as that of Jericho of old. None went out and none came in. Still the Commissioner went down to the Custom House every day, though work there was practically at a standstill. Now and then a steamer came outside the river, and after being thoroughly overhauled by the French ships outside was allowed to land a few stores for the foreigners in pilot-boats. No ship, however, could come inside the bar. The river was laid entirely with torpedoes and barricaded with huge junks full of stones, sunk just at the river's mouth. There was indeed a small passage left for Chinese gunboats, but this was kept a profound secret. And though the French prowled about and sent torpedo-boats to reconnoitre and find the way, still they did not venture to come inside the river. For all along it, on the heights, the downs were bristling with forts and guns, and on the low ground close to the bar was a dense jungle of screw-pine and orange-trees, under whose cover countless foes were doubtless lurking.

No more walks to the Black Beacon now. The tennis-ground was open as yet, but the days for using it were assuredly numbered. Still the French delayed firing the first shell, and until the shells were fired the foreigners were comparatively safe, though, of course, profoundly uncomfortable.

All, that is to say, except Mr. Drury. And yet he had looked forward to this time as one of complete misery, because of entire

separation from Isabel. And lo and behold ! here she was in the place, having utterly refused to leave her husband, and Mr. Drury could see her every day, when he came up for those most important consultations with the Consul. He chose another time of day for coming to the Red Fort now : the evening, when Mrs. Drury was safely on the tennis-ground and imagined he was safely in that Custom House from which he never came home now for tea. And Mr. Reynolds walked up and down the garden with the Commissioner and Mrs. Reynolds, talking and fussing, and reading his petitions to two strangely inattentive listeners. They walked abreast, Isabel in the middle. But Mr. Reynolds never fancied they were wanting in attention, in fact he never required their attention. There was only one dangerous man to him in the world now, and that was the French Admiral outside. Within Kantow community he was sure of everybody. He would as soon have dreamt of suspecting Mr. Clay as Mr. Drury himself.

Mr. Drury enjoyed those walks with Isabel very much. Mr. Reynolds' voice murmuring constantly was like the rippling of the waves at the Black Beacon. And to study Isabel in repose, as he was studying her now, was quite as great a delight to him as hearing her speak. Speak she did also, when Mr. Reynolds had darted away, as he constantly did, to fetch some other most important document. Those were perilous meetings, but a great deal too delightful not to have been risked, even under fear of Mrs. Drury.

In this state of living at death's door the foreign community of Kantow was passing away its September. Always a bad time of year in the island of Formosa for malarial fever, it was doubly bad now, on account of the fresh soil which was being constantly turned up for the earth-works. One after another dropped off from the tennis-ground, down with the fever, and even the Commissioner himself had one or two nasty touches of it. In this respect he was obliged to admit he was fortunate in having

Mrs. Drury as his sick-nurse. She was invaluable in a sick-room, and moreover possessed the much-to-be-longed-for tact that perceives when a sickness has come to an end, and the time for petting a man has passed. It was almost a joy to the Commissioner to find that his wife infinitely surpassed Isabel Reynolds in this province. Doing Patricia Drury bare justice on one point seemed to him to atone for many of his own shortcomings.

But as September was wearing to an end Mrs. Drury fell very sick. Really and seriously ill. The malarial poison seemed to have got into her system, and she could not shake off the constant fever. No more could she go to the tennis-ground, and yet her husband did not come home to tea. In fact, he never perceived how really unwell she was. How could he, when he only saw with Isabel's eyes, and they laughingly declared to him it was all humbug? True, Mr. Drury had had the fever himself, and a fellow-feeling ought to have made him wondrous kind. But somehow or other it didn't. And it bored him to go home to a bad dinner and a cross-tempered wife. He considered, indeed, that he was the injured person who deserved the pity. And Mrs. Drury suffered in consequence of this consideration what she had never made him suffer when he was only half as ill as she was now—neglect.

It happened that Mr. Reynolds heard from the doctor one fine evening how very unwell Mrs. Drury was. She had always been a great friend of his, so immediately upon receipt of the news he started off to see her, leaving the doctor and the Commissioner with his wife. It surprised him a little that Mr. Drury did not offer to accompany him, and the surprise grew greater, or, rather, took another turn, when Mrs. Drury, who was lying on the sofa in the drawing-room, greeted him with the abrupt question :

“Where is my husband, Mr. Reynolds?”

"Don't you know?" asked the Consul. "At my house. He always comes at this time to give me the latest news."

"At your house!" repeated Mrs. Drury slowly. Then, starting up suddenly, she seized hold of Mr. Reynolds' arm with a grasp that made the poor man wince.

"You haven't left him there, surely?" she said, in such a strangely unnatural voice that the Consul literally quaked. "You surely were not so mad, such an imbecile as to do *that*?"

"The woman is delirious," thought Mr. Reynolds to himself. "Temperature's certainly very high, her hand quite burns me. Wish I hadn't come!" Then he added in a soothing tone to Mrs. Drury: "All right, all right, we'll send him home to you. Don't you think you'd better lie down again?"

"Send him home!" cried Mrs. Drury in a still more excited tone. "Do you mean to say you have got to send him? Has it come to that? Oh, Mr. Reynolds, how can you let it go on! Why don't you stop it?"

"Stop what?" asked the Consul blandly. "I don't understand you, Mrs. Drury."

"No, of course you don't," she said contemptuously. "None are so blind as those that won't see. But you shall be made to see before long. Tell me, how often has Mr. Drury been at your house lately?"

"How can I tell?" said poor Mr. Reynolds, who was more and more convinced that Mrs. Drury had gone off her head, and who now was only longing to make his escape from a very unpleasant situation. "What does it matter? Do keep calm."

And he got himself free from her hand, and rose from his chair, with one eye fixed on the open door, ready to make a dart through it. Mrs. Drury noted the attitude and knew her last chance for speaking was fast slipping away. So, controlling herself with a mighty effort, she said, in a voice that could not help shaking a little:

"Mr. Reynolds, could you bear to see the happiness of my home wrecked by your wife?"

This would have been quite enough of a speech for Mr. Reynolds to take alarm at during any ordinary time. But these were extraordinary times, and his brain was not firmly enough fixed to be capable of taking in more than one danger at a time. And the greatest danger was undoubtedly outside Kantow, not within it. So he became more than ever convinced that Mrs. Drury was wandering in mind, and that her well-known dislike for his wife was the simple cause of her words.

"No, no," he said, edging towards the door. "It will all be right, quite right. Good-night." And he was half-way to the gate before Mrs. Drury had even had time to shout to him :

"Oh, listen, listen!"

"Mrs. Drury is certainly very ill," said the Consul to the Commissioner, as he joined him and Mrs. Reynolds on the oleander-shaded path. "She was delirious when I came in."

"Delirious!" stammered out Mr. Drury. "You don't mean to say so?"

"Yes, I do. She was asking after you."

"Oh!" There was a shade of annoyance in the "oh!" Mr. Drury did not care to be enquired after.

"I will go and see about her," he said. "Good-night, Consul. Let me hear if there is any news."

"Good-night, yes, certainly."

"Good-night, Mrs. Reynolds." Very ordinary words these, but the Consul fancied they were a little drawn out. Mrs. Drury was certainly delirious, but was her delirium of an infectious nature?

Perhaps slightly. For the minute Mrs. Drury was gone Mr. Reynolds said playfully, linking his arm in Isabel's, "She was delirious about you, Isabel. Said you were spoiling her home!"

Isabel could not help giving a little start. But it was only for a moment.

"What nonsense!" she said angrily. "It is only because she has always hated me like poison! What harm can I do to her?" And Mr. Reynolds was satisfied.

Which was more than Oliver Drury was. Matters were getting somewhat embarrassing to him now. He had pushed on his friendship with Isabel Reynolds to the uttermost end, and beyond that, what was there? Nothing but blackness. Here he was, tied to a wife, and madly in love with another woman. His home life was becoming impossible to him. Yet what way remained to him to get out of it?

Only one: to send Mrs. Drury home to England. But would she go, or at any rate consent to his staying behind? And could he face life alone with her now, after these days at Kantow with Isabel Reynolds?

All these questions, to which there were no answers, these plans which one breath of wind would knock down, kept on surging through his brain as he walked up the hill homewards. It was of no use trying to think out any one particular plan. He must leave it all to Fate. And Fate had brought him Isabel Reynolds in the present. Would not Fate kindly remove Mrs. Drury, without any personal injury to herself, to some spot a little distant from himself in the future?

It was very improbable, and yet its very improbability made it seem more hopeful. So, at least, Mr. Drury flattered himself. And as, after all, it could only be a question of so many days at best that were to be lived through in this maddening uncertainty, he felt himself strong enough to face Mrs. Drury in whatever mood he should find her now.

So, arming himself for the fray, the Commissioner walked into the drawing-room. It was empty.

"Patricia!"

No one answered. Mr. Drury pushed open the door of the bed-room and looked in.

Mrs. Drury was lying on her bed, with a handkerchief over her face. And Mr. Drury, who had all a man's horror for tears, turned tail and fled.

Not far. The Consul stood on the doorstep, with a face blanched with terror.

"Drury, see here! They are going to bombard the place to-morrow!"

And he held out a paper towards the bewildered Commissioner.

It was indeed so. The French Admiral notified the foreign community, through the British Consul, that he intended to bombard the forts of Kantow next day. He therefore begged that all neutrals would take refuge in some safe place, as, although their houses would not be aimed at, a good deal of damage would most probably be done. The information was precise enough, the danger near enough. Even Mr. Drury quailed before it for a moment.

"What is to be done? what is to be done?" cried Mr. Reynolds, wringing his hands in childish despair. "Where are we to go? We can't get up river, we should most likely be fired upon by the forts. And how can we stay in our houses to be killed like dogs, without a chance of fighting for our lives? It's wicked! it's wicked!"

The Consul's agitation completely calmed Mr. Drury. "We have two places," he said quietly, "the gunboat and the Red Fort. We shall be safe in either. We had better go and consult the captain, and then you must send round a circular calling on everyone to come together to the place chosen at daylight. There's safety in numbers, you know!"

"And our houses—are we to leave them?" lamented the Consul. "And the ladies, what can we do with them? Mrs. Drury so ill, too! The shock may kill her!"

Mr. Drury was busy finding out his sun-hat, and so his face was turned away from Mr. Reynolds. Even had he seen it, most likely the Consul would not have noticed anything strange about its expression. He was almost beside himself with fear.

Mr. Drury found it quite painful to walk down with Mr. Reynolds to the jetty. The nervous Consul grasped his arm in a most embarrassing manner, and started at every sound as though it came from an exploding shell. He could scarcely get into the boat, and when there he huddled himself under the awning, much too afraid to look out. Mr. Drury pitied him sincerely. But for the knowledge how deeply Mr. Reynolds was an injured man, he would have despised him heartily.

It was quite a relief to get to the gunboat and hear the common-sense view her commander took of the whole position. The danger was not at all serious, he affirmed. The French ships were much too far away to do any mischief. They could fire shells, certainly, but where would they go? Most likely nearly all would fall into the river. As for the safest place for the community to take refuge in, that was undoubtedly the Red Fort. And it would be pretty difficult for any shell to pierce through its thirteen-feet thick walls.

Even Mr. Reynolds felt a trifle re-assured. Or, rather, a trifle ashamed at needing to be re-assured. And Mr. Drury took him home, set him to write his circular, and took a turn with Isabel along their favourite path while the Consul was despatching his task.

Mrs. Reynolds was in the highest of spirits. With the inconsiderateness of a child, this bombardment seemed to her only "fun," something that would furnish her material for talking about all the rest of her days. She was not afraid, not she! To-morrow would make her a person to be admired, a woman who had gone through a battle. True, she could not boast of being the only woman, unfortunately Mrs. Drury must share the

honours with her. That was the one trifle that disturbed Isabel in anticipation.

"Think of being in the Red Fort with Mrs. Drury all day!" she said with a little stamp of her foot that amused the disloyal Oliver intensely. "Why, she may scratch my eyes out! That's positively dangerous! I don't think I'd better go there. I'll stay at home!"

"Nonsense, Isabel. You must go. Think how I must keep you in sight as long as there is any risk about. And you will get the best view, you know," he added by way of a bribe.

"Ah! I didn't think of that," was the rejoinder. And then Mr. Reynolds came out and they read over the circular, and approved of it, and Mr. Drury went home to his wife.

She was still in her bed-room, but Mr. Drury was no longer afraid of a scene. He had his duty to do by her, and felt that he cared not what she might say to him till this terrible day was over. For Mr. Drury saw neither with the eyes of Isabel nor with those of the commander of the gunboat, but with those of a man who feels his hours are numbered. And, though Mr. Drury was not superstitious, it gave him a queer and unpleasant sensation, as he walked up the hill to his own house, to think that he might be treading that path for the last time.

CHAPTER XVII.

Mrs. Drury took the news very calmly, scarcely seemed to hear it at all. The scene with the Consul had upset her grievously, and brought on another and severe attack of fever. She was quite unfit to help in the locking-up of valuables, quite useless in superintending their removal to the Red Fort, which business occupied Mr. Drury till late in the evening. It was a measure absolutely necessary after the experience foreigners had had of the looting by Chinese soldiers at Pagoda Anchorage, some six weeks before. And when all this work was finished, Mr. Drury sat down to make out his will once more.

This was also a wise thing to do, as the issue of the morrow was so very doubtful, and Mr. Drury was extremely anxious that, if anything by chance happened to him, Mrs. Drury at least should be comfortable. He felt more warmly towards her just then than he had done for many a long day. Still, this did not prevent his leaving a handsome legacy to Mr. Reynolds, by way of a sop to his own conscience. Nothing to Isabel: somehow or other he felt he could not put her name on the same paper as his wife's. And then, when it had been duly signed and witnessed by two Chinamen, he lay down, ready dressed, on a sofa at the bottom of Mrs. Drury's bed, and waited for daylight to come.

"Oliver, they're firing!"

It was Mrs. Drury's voice which awoke him. He raised himself on one elbow to listen. Yes, there was the sound of heavy guns, not from afar but from the earth-works close to their house. The Chinese had taken the initiative and opened the firing themselves.

It was seven o'clock and broad daylight. The Commissioner must have fallen asleep just when he ought to have been most awake. And there was Mrs. Drury, completely dressed, with a tray of coffee and eggs before her. Eating too, and quite composedly. Oliver wondered what Isabel Reynolds was doing at that moment, and if she took the firing as quietly as his wife. Her behaviour seemed to him almost unsuitable. A woman, he thought, should be frightened and want protecting. Whereas Mrs. Drury seemed more inclined to protect her husband than ask his protection.

Mr. Drury got up and ate his breakfast in silence. Mrs. Drury was moving about the room, shutting up drawers and boxes as though preparing for a journey. There was a sort of getting-ready-for-death sensation about the proceedings that the Commissioner did not relish. He bolted his eggs and then rose from the table, saying :

"Come along, Patricia, that will do ! You will be back here this evening !"

"I don't think so, Oliver," she answered steadily. "I have a firm impression that I shall be killed to-day. And I don't want you to be uncomfortable in consequence."

"Nonsense," said Oliver Drury, trying to laugh. "Not unless you get hit before we reach the Red Fort. And then the same shell that finishes you will finish me too. So we can leave the preparations to others !"

Mrs. Drury did not answer this grim pleasantry, but put on her hat and took up her umbrella. Needless to remark, it was her best hat and her new umbrella. For she was going to meet the

entire community of Kantow, and, unless she was stopped by death, she must appear in becoming costume.

Then they went out together, walking, for all the Chinese servants had fled, and the chair-coolies had put down the chair in the verandah, but were nowhere in sight. Mrs. Drury took hold of her husband's arm, but even by its help she could only walk very slowly. It was indeed a perilous walk. The sound of firing was becoming more and more frequent, and every now and then some huge mass was seen to whizz through the air, happily at a distance, and disappear from view, to be followed soon after by a terrific explosion, the results of which Mr. and Mrs. Drury did not dare to try and see. Never had it seemed to the Commissioner that the way was so long to the Consulate before. He held the umbrella over his wife, as though by so doing he could save her from a falling shell. And he took her close to the walls and hedges, avoided open spaces, and pulled her up the slopes as though she had been a child. Notwithstanding all this, it was a good quarter of an hour after leaving the house that Mr. Drury carried his wife, now thoroughly exhausted, up the steps that led to the Red Fort, and deposited her in a place of safety within the inner compartment of Mr. Reynolds' office. At any rate no shell could touch her there.

The old Red Fort was divided into two rooms or compartments, the inner one generally serving as the Consul's office, while the outer was usually occupied by his Chinese clerks. Below this storey were the Consular prisons, now filled with Chinese servants, belonging to the various foreigners of the place, who had fled there for refuge. The foreign community itself was massed in the outer room, which was already filled with a dense cloud of tobacco smoke, and was fragrant with the fumes of various spirits, with which the much troubled nerves of the neutrals were to be sustained. Mr. Drury, having deposited his wife in safety, elbowed his way through the crowd, ostensibly to find Mr. Reynolds but

really to look for Isabel. Some sixteen or eighteen men were there, including three or four missionaries, who were praying most fervently in a corner. In another one Mr. Drury found the Consul wrapped in a huge ulster, although the day was very warm, as the 1st of October usually is in North Taiwan, and literally shivering with fear. Mr. de Lacy Smith, with a half-consumed glass of whisky-and-soda, was close beside him. But there was no sign of Mrs. Reynolds.

Every now and then a sound like as of a passing rocket came through the open door as shell after shell flew past the Fort. The French were firing recklessly, the Chinese replying calmly. The blockaders were certainly taking no heed of the British flag that was waving from the top of the Red Fort; indeed, they seemed rather to be aiming for it, for the shells whizzed nearer and nearer, and Mr. Reynolds' fears were not altogether groundless.

"Where is your wife, Consul?" the Commissioner asked. It did not matter to him who was listening to what he was saying just then. For Isabel Reynolds was assuredly not in the Fort, and therefore not in safety. What might be happening to her at that moment from that shell which had just rushed madly past the open door? Mr. Drury felt he should go mad if he did not see Mrs. Reynolds appear at once.

"I don't know. She was here a few minutes ago. Oh dear! that one nearly hit! Some whisky, for heaven's sake, Drury!"

But the Commissioner was gone, gone to find Isabel, even at the cannon's mouth. He took one final look at the inner room, where Mrs. Drury was being attended to by the doctor, paused one moment at the door of the Fort, and then went out into the verandah, a modern addition to the old Dutch building, from which he and Isabel and Mr. Reynolds had often looked at the French ships lying at anchor and idle outside.

They were not idle now. Puff after puff of white smoke seemed to issue from them, wrapping them in a dark cloud, to

be met by another dark cloud from the land. The Chinese were firing from a White Fort, close to that beach which led to the Black Beacon of the past golden days. He had often looked at that White Fort after or before his time at the Beacon: Would he and Isabel ever look at it together again? Who knew? This day might settle up all that was amiss, the common danger shared and passed make Mrs. Drury and Mrs. Reynolds firm friends. And if friends, ah, then heaven would be a poor place after Kantow. So little did Oliver Drury need to make him quite happy.

But where was Isabel now? He had waited for her on the verandah quite five minutes. She could not be in the Fort; where was she then? And all of a sudden Oliver Drury realised that she had kept the word he had fondly imagined was only spoken in jest that last evening. She was staying at home.

Without realising for an instant the danger he was running, the Commissioner raced down the steps of the verandah and along the familiar oleander-shaded path. The shells were dropping not so very far from him now—one had fallen half-way down the hill, between him and the Custom House, and had just exploded with a terrific report. Mr. Drury only ran on the faster. He did not care the least who saw him from the Fort windows. Mrs. Drury might have looked out and shouted for all he saw and heard. And so he got to the Consulate, cleared the verandah steps almost at one bound, and burst open the door, crying out:

“Isabel, where are you?”

“Here,” answered a voice from the drawing-room. A very small and very frightened voice. Mr. Drury moved in its direction.

Isabel Reynolds was hiding, actually hiding under a writing-table, shivering with fear just as her husband was shaking at the Red Fort. Only the fear seemed right in the woman, whereas the bravery had seemed wrong in Mrs. Drury. The Commissioner lifted the girl up and kissed her.

"I am so frightened, Oliver! Do take me away, please!" Isabel Reynolds' arms were clutching Mr. Drury's neck, and her head was hidden on his shoulder. The Commissioner felt a glow pass all over him, in spite of the danger all around. Isabel was so utterly dependent on him, so childishly clinging. Mr. Drury was no longer her lover, but her guardian and protector. And, as he might have soothed his own child had he ever possessed one, Oliver Drury stroked the curly head and patted the beautiful arm of this girl whose only hope lay in himself.

"Isabel, darling, we mustn't stay here. It isn't safe. Can't you come with me to the Fort?"

"Oh no, oh no!" said Isabel in terror. "I couldn't get there. I should stop and scream every moment. And then they'd aim at me, I know they would!"

The situation was too serious a one for the Commissioner to stop to expostulate. The shells were coming nearer and nearer each time; evidently the Consulate was directly in the line of fire. If they were ever going to get to the Red Fort, they must start at once. And if Isabel could not walk—why, he must carry her. After Mrs. Drury, she would be a feather-weight.

"Isabel," he said, "I am going to carry you across. Put your arms round my neck, so—Oh, my God!"

* * * * *

"Reynolds! Reynolds! Good Heavens! that hit your house! See the smoke and dust! What a fearful explosion! Thank goodness you were here!"

Angus Murray rushed in with these words from the verandah of the Red Fort, where, with the coolness of a disinterested spectator, all his personal goods being safely inside the prison, he had been watching the engagement. This last shell had come pretty near the fort, too near to be pleasant, and had exploded with terrific force against a corner of Mr. Reynolds' bungalow, shattering one half of the house. Nothing remained now of that

pleasant room where Mr. Reynolds had so often drunk his tea, and from which he had so often walked out upon the verandah, but a smoking mass of fallen-in bricks and tiles.

All the Kantow community had heard the terrific crash, and all imagined that some part of the Red Fort had been struck. Terrified that the broken walls, wherever they were, would somehow or other fall in upon them, every man was rushing wildly about, trying to find a corner to hide in. The missionaries had ceased their prayers and were hiding behind a Japanese screen.

There was a general rush towards the door when Angus Murray brought in the news, and a still speedier retreat as another shell whizzed past, close to the verandah, and pitched just outside the great brown Consulate gate. Death was certainly very near them all. Not one of the gay young men of the place felt in the least like laughing, although there was no lack of spirits, of course, for internal application. And Angus Murray kept watch on the verandah, and every now and then brought in a report.

"Where is the Commissioner?"

It was Mrs. Drury who asked this question, all of a sudden. And everyone started and looked round. Where, indeed, was the Commissioner?

"I saw him a little time ago," said Mr. De Lacy Smith. "He must be out on the verandah with Murray."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Drury in a satisfied tone.

"Last shot nearly hit the *Pelican*," said Angus Murray, putting his head in at the door.

"Is Mr. Drury out there?" Patricia Drury called out. "I want to speak to him."

"No."

"No? Where is he then?"

Everyone looked at everyone in the blankest amazement. The Commissioner not outside? Not inside either? This was getting serious.

"I will go and see if he is downstairs," volunteered Mr. Clay.

"And Mrs. Reynolds—where is Mrs. Reynolds?" cried Mrs. Drury.

"She is not here either!"

"Mercy on us!"

The exclamation came from the Consul, under the office-table. And a dead and awful silence fell on all the community when Mr. Clay announced, in a voice full of horror: "I can't find either of them anywhere in the Fort!"

Mrs. Drury leaned back and closed her eyes. She did not faint, nor make any sign of feeling. But she felt in her mind that the great gulf between herself and her husband would not be filled up that day. For she knew as well as if she had seen them herself, that Mr. Drury and Mrs. Reynolds were together. In some safe place, of course. How could her husband so forget himself as to let all the community into his secret?

"Was Mrs. Reynolds at home to-day?"

It was the doctor who was asking the Consul the question.

"I don't know! Oh, do you mean, was she there when the shell——?"

Horror choked Mr. Reynolds' voice. He crawled out from the table, and looked out of a window towards his ruined house.

"Because—I saw Mr. Drury running down there half an hour ago, before that shell——"

He had said the last words in a whisper, but Mrs. Drury had caught them all. That is, heard without understanding. Nor did she understand why, all the rest of that long dreadful day, all the men looked at her so pityingly, spoke in softer tones, and tried all they could to make her comfortable. No doubt they were sorry that Mr. Drury had so neglected her during this dreadful firing, most likely some of the older men would remonstrate with him on the subject. But Patricia herself, she would never forgive him, no, never.

The firing became less and less as the day wore on, and now it was ceasing altogether. No more shells were aimed at the Consulate, and, in fact, none which were likely to do any damage at all.

Three or four men were whispering together near the outer door—Mr. Clay, Angus Murray and the doctor. Then they came up to the Consul, and asked him a question which made Mrs. Drury's blood run cold all of a sudden.

"We are going to look for them. Will you come, too?"

"No, no" shivered the Consul. But a voice close behind him said, in a tone that made them all shiver, so hollow and deathly did it sound:

"For mercy's sake, take me with you."

"No, dear Mrs. Drury, stay here. We will bring you back all the news."

And they went, without looking behind them. Had they done so they would have seen Mrs. Drury following.

They had not far to go. Only to the still steaming heap of ruins where once the drawing-room of the Consulate had stood. But as they stooped round it, and shouted out familiar names, a shriek rang through the air, and turning round they saw Mrs. Drury lying senseless on the ground.

* * * * *

The graveyard at Kantow is a small one, ill-kept and little-cared for. Those who loved the dead who sleep there are all far away. But no one visits Kantow now without going to see the tall white cross that rises near the centre of the ground. This is the inscription on it:

OLIVER DRURY

COMMISSIONER I.M. CUSTOMS

ISABEL REYNOLDS

WIFE OF H.B.M. CONSUL

KILLED DURING THE FRENCH BOMBARDMENT,

1884.

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